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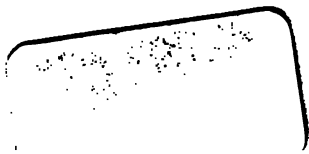
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A BROKEN BLOSSOM.

A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S CONFLICT," ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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A BROKEN BLOSSOM.



CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE QUARREL.

ST. PUCELLE never looked more beautiful than it did on the day that I took that walk with Charlie Sandilands. The summer glories, yet unfaded, had been overtaken by those of autumn, and the rich clusters of purple grapes that hung upon the walls of my guardian's house made a brilliant contrast to the scarlet and white and rose-coloured geraniums that still bloomed luxuriantly on

the window-sills. The purple heather reigned alone upon the hill-side, but ferns of various sorts were arching their graceful fronds above it, and the merry brown hares were leaping amongst the brushwood and filling the place with life. As I led Charlie up the hill (for I would not let Tessie's silly remark deter me from showing him the glorious expanse of scenery to be gained from the summit) I pointed out the beauties of the country to him with so much interest as to excite the remark that I appeared entirely to have forgotten poor old Norwood in my new love for St. Pucelle.

This was exactly the sort of thing I had hoped Charlie would say to me, for I had had two reasons in inviting him to a confidential interview : one was to ask his advice about writing to Mr. Warrington ; the other to find out if he intended to be sensible during his stay in our neighbourhood, and permit

me to enjoy his company without being annoyed by his sentimentality. So I answered briskly :

‘I never cared for Norwood itself, you know, Charlie, and you would scarcely expect me to get up an enthusiastic admiration for a suburb of London, composed of bricks and mortar and stunted trees. Its recollections are sacred to me, because my dear mother lies there, but that is all.’

‘I was sure that coming abroad would give you a distaste for all the old things,’ he said, in a desponding manner.

‘Don’t talk rubbish, Charlie! You were sure of no such thing! If you ask me if I was happy at Norwood, I answer “*yes*” most fervently. If you ask me if I liked the place as a residence, I answer, as fervently, “*no*.” I should have been happy with my mother in St. Giles’s; but I should not have admired the locality.’

‘Ah well! Let us return to St. Pucelle,’ he said, with a sigh.

‘No! I refuse to return to St. Pucelle until I have spoken a few words to you. Do you mean to enjoy your holiday here, Charlie, and to let me enjoy it, or not?’

‘I don’t understand what you’re driving at.’

‘I’m driving at you, or rather at that receptacle for nonsense you call your brain. Now you know I am very fond of you, Charlie, and have been for years. You are so associated with my darling mother, that you seem like a link with the past to me; and I should like to treat you like a younger brother, and to feel that you looked upon me as a sister. But that can never be whilst you attempt to stuff any of your sentiment down my throat.’

‘Really, Hilda——’

‘Really, Charlie, please to hear me out first, and have your say afterwards. If I

thought that what you told me at Norwood proceeded from a feeling such as men conceive in their maturity, and preserve for their whole lives, I should not dare broach the subject to you again. But I am sure it did not.'

'You imagine, in fact, that I am such a *boy*,' with a withering accent on the word, 'that I am incapable of a lasting passion.'

'Just so! That is just what I do think; at least, I am sure the fancy you took for me was born entirely of association and compassion.'

'I confess I do not follow you.'

'Oh yes, you do! There are several kinds of love, Charlie, but only one is the right one with which to enter upon a partnership for life. You had known me for so long: you had become so *used* to me, in fact, that when you thought of our separation, and under such melancholy circumstances, the

pain seemed too hard to bear, and your mind flew to the only means by which you could have kept me with you. I have often and often thought of it since, and I am sure I am right. It was very good and sweet and true of you, Charlie, and I love you the better for it, but you should thank God I was more clear-sighted than yourself, for we should have been a very miserable couple.'

'Do you think so, Hilda?'

'I am *sure* of it! My dear boy, you are just at that age when men think they can live happily with any woman who is young and passably good-tempered and passably good-looking. But the daily companionship of a married life is a terrible crucible through which to pass the affections, and only the true ore will bear the test of it.'

'I suppose you have found the "true ore" in St. Pucelle,' he grumbled.

'Don't be impudent, Charlie! Every word

you say convinces me more and more of the truth of my conviction. Now do be reasonable, my dear child——'

'I won't be called your "dear child."'

'My dear boy, then.'

'Nor your "dear boy."'

'What then, my dear Mr. Sandilands? Oh, you baby! If you were fifty-two instead of twenty-two, you would be skipping with pleasure at being called a child. However, I will try not to hurt your feelings again. I won't call you "dear" at all.'

'No, Hilda! don't say that.'

'Confess, then, that you made a mistake the other day at Norwood, and that I, with my independent spirit and intolerance of control, would never have made you happy in the way you wished me to do.'

'I will confess no such thing!'

'But your heart is not broken, Charlie. Come! I said, looking round into his face.

He caught my glance and smiled

‘Eureka!’ I exclaimed; ‘I knew I should get at the truth at last.

‘Well! of course it’s not *broken*,’ he replied, in a foolish, half-shamed manner; ‘or I shouldn’t be walking here, but you made me very miserable, you know, Hilda! I am sure I hardly ate anything for a month after you left. But you had said it was of no use, and you never should change your mind, and so I tried to make the best of it. A man cannot go on crying over spilt milk for ever, can he?’

‘Of course not,’ I said energetically; ‘and it is so brave and nice of you to tell me the truth, Charlie. It makes me feel we shall be such real friends henceforward. And I want your friendship so much. I should have been unhappy to think that you had put it out of my power to confide in you; for things are not quite so straight here as they ought to be.’

‘What! with the Lovetts! Aren’t they kind to you?’

‘The girls are sweetness itself. I never had more lovable companions.’

‘The one I saw first seemed very jolly; the pretty one, I mean!’

‘What, Tessie? the one with fair hair?’

‘Yes!’

‘Oh! we call little Ange the beauty! Her face is perfectly lovely when you look into it.’

‘I didn’t see so much of her. She kept right behind her sister. But Miss Lovett appeared the prettiest girl I had ever seen, to me—except yourself, Hilda, of course,’ added Charlie, pulling himself up with a sudden recollection of the proprieties.

I laughed so heartily that I entirely discomposed him.

‘Oh, Charlie! you have not half learned your lesson yet! I know I’m a very pretty

girl, because you've so often told me so ; but I do not expect nor wish that you should never meet somebody you think much better-looking than myself. And Tessie Lovett and I are formed upon two such entirely opposite models ! How could you think my wounded vanity would require that little postscript of yours as salve ?'

'I'll tell you what I *do* think, Hilda,' said Charlie, with sudden bluntness, 'and that is, that you are the most honest and straightforward woman I've ever known ; and I'm sure the man who gets you will be an out-and-out lucky fellow, whoever he may be.'

'Well, never mind him, Charlie ; he has not appeared upon the scene as yet, so we can go on very well without him. Tessie has, as you say, a very sweet and pretty face, and the goodness of her heart shines through her eyes and makes it beautiful. She has a

great deal of trouble and anxiety to bear, and she bears it with the utmost meekness and patience. I have a great affection for her, and I hope I shall live to see her the wife of some good man whose love will make up for the sorrows of her youth. And as this brings me to the very point on which I want to consult you, Charlie, suppose we sit down on this bank whilst I tell you my difficulties.'

We had reached the Calvary now, the very place where I had first met the Mère Fromard, and were as much alone and more secure from listeners than if we had been shut up within four walls. So I commenced to recount the perplexity in which I found myself with regard to money—the attempts I had made to procure it and the failures that had succeeded them—and ended by asking him to tell me whether it would be advisable to communicate with Mr. Warrington on the

subject, or to wait and see what time might bring me.

I had called Charlie Sandilands a 'baby,' and in some things a young man in love, or supposing himself to be so, is a very great baby compared to an energetic and helpful woman with all her wits about her. Yet I knew when it came to a question of business, *pur et simple*, that his decision would be worth twenty of mine, being less likely to be actuated by any other feeling than a desire to see justice done to his friend. His advice was that I should write without any delay to Mr. Warrington, and tell him all I knew.

'Who had the management of your mother's affairs during her lifetime, Hilda?'

'Mr. Lovett entirely, I believe; at least, you see it was on this wise, Charlie. My mother had a small pension granted to her by Government, on account of my father's scientific discoveries being adopted by the

nation, but that died with her. The only real property my father left behind him consists of shares in a tea-raising company in the Himalayas, producing annually one hundred and fifty pounds, and that is the money for which Mr. Lovett is still trustee for me.'

'But there should be two trustees, Hilda.'

'There were two, I think ; but the other one died, and mamma never appointed a successor to him. Mr. Warrington mentioned something about it to me, I remember, but I forgot it again. Will you be the other trustee, Charlie ?

'I should like to be so very much, but I cannot say if I am fitted for such a post. You had better ask Warrington. Used Mr. Lovett to send your mamma the interest of these shares regularly ?

'I don't think he did, of late years ; but it

always came eventually, or we should not have been able to live. It seems very strange, though, that now he should be unable to lay his hand on a few pounds for me, does it not ?'

'I don't like it at all, Hilda, and I wish you would write to Warrington about it by this night's post.'

'Suppose my letter should bring him over here ?'

'All the better if it is necessary ! You may be sure he will not come unless he considers it so.'

'I shall tell him with twice the confidence now that I have had your advice, Charlie. I was so very undecided whether to write to him or your mother. In fact, I had begun a letter to Mrs. Sandilands when you arrived.'

'Mother couldn't have advised you on her own responsibility. It isn't a matter for a

woman's decision—nor for a man's, except he be a lawyer. I hope Warrington may ask you to sell out your shares and invest them in something else. I don't like tea; it's so very uncertain. A rainy season—or a dry one—might deprive you of half your income.'

'That would be awkward! But I confess to an entire and appalling ignorance concerning shares and selling out and all that kind of thing. I am afraid I did not even know where the money came from till Mr. Warrington told me.'

'That is not like your usual sense, Hilda; and since it is all you have to depend upon, I should think the sooner you made yourself acquainted with its source and securities the better.'

'Yes, I feel I have been foolish. There is another thing, Charlie. Do you think I could get my money into my own hands?'

Mr. Warrington promised me I should be quite independent, and I should feel so much more so if I paid Mr. Lovett what we agreed upon, instead of having it kept back from me like a child.'

'I should say it would be not only feasible but right that you should manage your own income. I don't think you have been treated at all fairly, Hilda, and I have not conceived a very high idea of your reverend guardian in consequence.'

'You had better wait till you see him and judge for yourself, Charlie. You know the old adage, "What is one man's meat is another man's poison." I may have been viewing the old gentleman through distorted lenses. But I fear the rosier glasses would never make him look a saint to me again.'

'Who's that foreign-looking chap staring at you, Hilda?' interposed Charlie, abruptly.

I followed his glance and encountered the

graceful form of the Baron de Nesselrode. He was attired in a velveteen shooting-suit of a golden-brown hue; had a game-bag slung across his shoulder, and carried a gun in his hand. Following at his heels were several dogs, amongst which the two gaunt wolf-hounds that we had seen at the château contributed to form a most picturesque group.

As the Baron met my gaze; he smiled slightly, lifted his *sombrero*, and with a low bow passed on his way. But not before I had caught the look of decided dissatisfaction he threw towards my companion, who was sitting very close to me upon the bank. The look annoyed me, though I scarcely knew why. I certainly did not wish Monsieur de Nesselrode nor anybody else in St. Pucelle to think I was indulging in a flirtation with Charlie Sandilands, but at the same time I liked him too well to see any slight cast upon

him without inwardly resenting it. So a blight fell on my spirits as the Baron passed out of sight.

‘Who is he? do you know him?’ asked Charlie, as soon as we were alone again.

‘Of course I know him, or I should not have returned his bow. That is the Baron de Nesselrode—a great friend of all the Lovetts—and a particular one of Tessie’s.’

‘A particular friend of Miss Lovett’s!’ repeated my companion. ‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean what I say; and I hope and think that at some future time he will be more than a friend to her. They would make a charming couple, for he is so thoroughly well-bred and courtier-like, and she has been reared in the atmosphere of a Court, although her father is now too poor to permit them to mix in society.’

‘Do you mean that he’ll marry her?’ demanded Charlie, who was rather dull of comprehension.

‘What else do you suppose I could mean? Nothing is settled, remember; but the Baron wants a wife terribly, and Tessie is so sweet, I think she would love anybody who was kind to her.’

‘Well, I should have thought she could do a deal better than that for herself.’

This disparaging remark was a signal-match for my bad temper, and I fired up immediately.

‘What a commonplace manner you have of expressing your ideas, Charlie. Besides, you do not know what you’re talking about. Monsieur de Nesselrode belongs to one of the first and oldest families of France. His ancestors have been barons by feudal right ever since the days of Charlemagne; and if it were not that he had been a little wild and

careless of his money, you would not have seen him in a place like St. Pucelle at all. The Château des Roses, which he occupies here, is the least important portion of his estates. He possesses land in Switzerland, and Normandy, and Anjou, and is the owner of extensive house property in Paris. The De Nesselrodes have been attached to the King's service ever since one of their ancestors saved a royal life. I believe you would not find better blood in all France than runs in the veins of the gentleman who has just passed us.'

'Well, you seem to know all about him, at any rate, Hilda,' replied Charlie, when want of breath compelled me to stop my running commentary on the Baron's pedigree. 'I dare say it's all true, but his title and estates don't alter my opinion one bit. I should still think Miss Lovett a great deal too good for him.'

‘But why? He is very handsome and accomplished, and you know nothing against his character?’

‘He’s a Frenchman! that’s quite enough for me,’ said Charlie, with beautiful British depreciation of everybody who did not belong to the same nation as himself. ‘And an English girl must be too good for him, if he’s a lord or a costermonger.’

‘What absurd prejudice!’ I replied, with a curling lip; ‘and I should have credited you with more good taste than to speak of a noble of France in that way.’

‘Noble of fiddlesticks! Does he ever wash himself, that’s the question, Hilda? I don’t believe any of these foreigners do.’

‘Why don’t you call him a “frog” at once, or a “Johnny Crapeau”?’ I returned witheringly. ‘It would be about as brilliant and as much in accordance with modern enlightenment as what you are saying now. I declare

you put me out of all patience. And to think, too, that a man like Armand de Nesselrode should have been laid open, by his own folly, to the animadversions of a—a--Somerset House clerk!

‘Hullo, Hilda! are you really angry with me? Why, what is this fellow to you, even if he should be going to marry the pretty Miss Lovett?’

‘Tessie is my friend, Charlie, and if she ever becomes the Baronne de Nesselrode, her husband will be my friend also. You can judge for yourself, then, if it is very pleasant for me to sit by and hear you talk in that way of him.’

‘You must have enough to do if you take up the cudgels for all your friends’ friends after this fashion. However, I am very sorry if I have offended you, Hilda, and I will try and believe that your fine Baron *does* wash himself, if it pleases you I should do so.’

‘ Please not to mention the subject again ; it disgusts me,’ I said loftily, as I rose from my seat and commenced to descend the hill.

Poor Charlie walked by my side in silence till we had got nearly half-way home, when he said :

‘ You’re not cross with me still, are you, Hilda ?’

‘ I have no right to be cross, but you disappoint me. Are these old prejudices never to be done away with, and the two finest nations in the world to meet on terms of perfect amity and mutual esteem ? The greater intellects of earth have abandoned them long since, and it is lowering to one’s conceptions of human generosity to find they still linger in the breasts of one’s intimate friends. Why, I suppose, in the whole course of your life, you have never associated with so intellectual and highly-bred a man as Monsieur

de Nesselrode ; indeed, I am *sure* you have not. Men like himself are not to be met with in the purlieus of Somerset House, or amongst the "snobbery" of London suburbs. And yet you think you have a right to laugh at him, simply because he is not an Englishman. You make me hate British patriotism ! Displayed in this fashion, it is vulgar, offensive, coarse ! You would receive more politeness and appreciation yourself from the commonest labourer you met on these country roads than you have accorded to-day to Monsieur de Nesselrode.'

'Hilda, I'm awfully sorry ! I had no idea you thought so much of this chap as all that.'

This insinuation nettled me still further.

'I wish to goodness you wouldn't call him a "chap"—your cockneyisms grate on my ears like a file,' I said angrily. 'Please to remember that for the last three months I have

been unused to hear the elegancies of the English language.'

This put a summary end to all conversation between us until we reached the Lovetts' house, when Charlie timidly offered me his hand, and said he supposed he had better go back to the hotel.

'Good-bye,' I answered curtly, without any comment on his remark, and the poor young fellow turned away and walked down the street with a very crestfallen air.

I think I was a little *too* hard upon him, but the conviction did not strike me until some hours afterwards. I don't remember feeling at all penitent until I went to bed that night, and then, on reviewing the day's proceedings, I was not only sorry but surprised to think that I should have quarrelled with Charlie Sandilands, and for the first time in the course of our long acquaintance-ship.

Why was it? What could have made me so quick and peppery? It could never have been a foolish disappointment because Armand de Nesselrode had passed me without speaking. As that thought struck me I buried my burning face in the pillows for shame, and resolved that I would apologise to dear old Charlie, and make it up with him again the very first thing in the morning.



CHAPTER II.

MR. CHARTERIS.

I HOPED all the next day that Charlie would come, but he didn't. My rough speech had hurt his feelings too much, and I heard afterwards that he wandered about the country in a melancholy mood, from sunrise to sunset, making fierce resolutions to return home by the very next opportunity, which, of course, never came to anything.

I sat indoors all the morning, inditing my letter to Mr. Warrington, in which I told him exactly what had occurred, and begged him

to let me have the management of my money in my own hands. I gave him a most faithful account of torn dresses, worn-out gloves, and shabby bonnets, and assured him that the very stamp I used to convey my wishes to him, I should not have been able to procure, had I not found a few centimes lying on the mantelpiece in the *salle à manger*, and annexed them boldly, under Mr. Lovett's own eyes.

Having finished my epistle I put it in my pocket, ready for the post, and went downstairs to join the girls. As I passed through the kitchen, I saw Madame Marmoret leaning her two elbows on the open window-sill, whilst she talked with the same tradesman, in the peaked cap and the belted blue blouse, who had drawn my trustee aside for a private conference as he was conducting me from the diligence to the house, on the occasion of my arrival in St. Pucelle.

‘*Tiens*, m’sieu!’ she was saying in a friendly and confidential tone, as I placed my foot on the top step of the stairs. ‘You are not worse off than I am : we must wait, wait, wait! There is no other chance for us. The time cannot be far off now. Sooner or later it must come.’

‘But what will there be for us when it *does* come?’ grumbled the man; ‘that is the question, Madame! I heard a great deal of this demoiselle Anglaise and all the money she was to bring with her, but where is it? I should like to see some in my hand, were it ever so little.’

‘Bah! you are a fool to have believed the old man. You know him of old. What would he not say to silence your importunities? The demoiselle Anglaise has nothing—next to nothing! She is a pauper, *une avare*, and close-fisted as a German; and the sooner she goes back to her own country, I say, the

better! We shall make nothing out of her.'

This was a pleasant speech to overhear made of myself by an insolent old woman who chose to resent her master's impecuniosity upon me. But I resolved Madame should know that I *had* overheard it, and stamped my foot in consequence.

'*Tiens!* there is some one,' exclaimed the man, drawing backwards.

Madame turned her brown face with its wicked-looking eyes towards me without altering the position of her elbows on the window-sill.

'*Eh bien*, mamselle!' she said, without the slightest appearance of confusion. 'You have a light foot! I hope your heart corresponds to it!'

'Thank you, Madame!' I replied, in the same manner. 'I have a light step I believe, and a quick ear, and a retentive memory.'

You will never find me forget one compliment you are kind enough to pay me!

‘That is well,’ she laughed, as though she took my words in perfect good faith, ‘for I am very poor, you see, and any little remembrance *mamselle* sees fit to bestow upon me will be gratefully acknowledged.’

Really, this woman’s insolence was past bearing! That, and the conversation I had overheard, which so plainly betrayed what use my arrival at St. Pucelle had been put to, made my cheeks flame with indignation, and I walked past her to the sitting-room with the air of a queen. I had expected to find Tessie and Ange there, engaged in needle-work, but I was mistaken. Except for Cave Charteris, sitting in the window reading a French novel, the room was empty.

I have already attempted to describe the terms on which I found myself with this gentleman, but they are not easy of por-

traiture. We were perfectly friendly and polite to one another, but he was already more intimate and confidential with the girls than with myself. The new acquaintanceship appeared to be terribly kept back by the remembrance of the old friendship, and the mutual fear we secretly entertained, lest a free intercourse might lead to some allusion to the past, deterred us from ever seeking the company of one another.

Confidence was at an end between us, and ease had followed it. I liked him still—thought him very handsome—and wished him no evil, but there my interest ended. The advice which I had sought from Charlie Sandilands, and which could have been so much better accorded me by a man of thirty, I had never dreamed of asking at the hands of Cave Charteris. I should have left the room again now, not directly I perceived he was in it, but at the first reasonable oppor-

tunity, had he not deterred me by broaching the very subject that had set my face in a flame.

‘There appears to be a very animated conversation going on in the kitchen, Miss Marsh,’ he commenced. ‘Is anything wrong there?’

‘Nothing worse than the tongue of Madame Marmoret, which is a continual scourge,’ I answered hotly. ‘The impertinence of that woman knows no bounds. How the Lovetts can endure it as they do, I can’t imagine; but for my own part I shall be compelled to make a formal complaint on the subject, if it is not put a stop to. I have not been accustomed to be insulted by servants, and I will not submit to it.’

‘Has she dared to insult you?’ he asked quickly.

Then I remembered the exact bearing of

the affront I had overheard, and wished I had not mentioned it. Of all people in the world, I would not have told Mr. Charteris my money troubles. He might have offered to assist me out of them.

‘ I overheard part of the conversation you have alluded to, and it was not complimentary to myself. Madame Marmoret hates me and says so openly, though I am not aware I have ever given her cause of offence. It is nothing to me what she thinks or does not think, but I will not suffer it to be bawled out of a kitchen window loud enough for the whole of St. Pucelle to hear.’

‘ I should think not, indeed ! You should speak to Mr. Lovett about it. Hilda, are you happy here ?’

I started. It was the first time he had called me by my Christian name since the moment he recognised me in the *salle à manger*.

‘Yes,’ I answered quietly. ‘I am quite happy, thank you.’

‘I do not know, of course, anything of your private affairs, neither have I the right to ask, but I don’t consider things are as comfortable here as they ought to be. I am only on a shooting excursion myself, and prepared to live “in the rough,” but even I could wish for a few more of the luxuries of civilisation. Mr. Lovett calls you his adopted daughter, still——’

‘I am not his adopted daughter,’ I interrupted quickly, ‘nor have I any desire to be so. I do not know what motive he has in saying it. I pay for my board and lodging here, just as you do. Mr. Lovett offered me the home, after my mother’s death, and I accepted it, for the sake of rest and quiet. But I do not at all know how long I shall remain with them.’

‘Is it so? The old gentleman made me

understand quite differently. But I am very glad to hear you are independent, Hilda. Forgive me for being so bold as to say so ; but I know of old what a proud spirit you have, and can imagine nothing more galling to you than to eat the bread of charity.'

'Nothing would have induced me to do so. I would have scrubbed floors first.'

'I am sure of it. Neither does our reverend friend appear to me to be in a position to extend hospitality to his friends. I have been assailed more than once since my sojourn here, by people entreating me to use my influence with him to make him pay what he owes them.'

'Have you really, Mr. Charteris!'

This was a subject on which I felt I *could* speak with him—on which, too, he might give me some valuable advice.

'Oh, it is no secret! The old man is in debt all over this town and a dozen others.

I knew that before I had been here a week. But it is no concern of ours. All we have to do is to pay our way as long as it suits our convenience, and to leave him when it ceases to do so. But the old sinner has contrived to book me for the next two months, anyway!

‘How so?’ I demanded, with interest.

‘Why, the second or third day I was here—before I knew all this, you know—he asked me, as a great favour, to advance him fifty pounds—for something that he wanted on *your* account, I believe.’

‘On *my* account!’ I cried, flaring up. ‘How *dared* he? Oh, Mr. Charteris, I hope you will believe this is perfect news to me! I owe Mr. Lovett nothing. He is my trustee, and has all my money in his own hands. It was shameful of him to use my name in the matter!’

‘Now, don’t agitate yourself in that



fashion. I knew at once it was a ruse of the old boy's, but it was not my business to say so, and it made no difference to me if he had the money in advance or not.'

'And you paid him fifty pounds for two months' board!' I said incredulously.

'Something like it. I believe the agreement was that I should pay five pounds a week.'

At this I could not help laughing.

'You must be very rich to be able to afford to throw your money away in that way.'

'I am not poor,' he answered slowly; and I wondered where his money had come from.

He had not been independent in the old days—far from it; for he had often talked to me of the necessity of his working to provide a home before he could take a wife to himself. Perhaps his father had died in the silent interim that stretched between the present

and the past. Before I quite knew what I was about, I had asked the question :

‘Is your father alive still?’

‘Yes. Why do you ask?’

‘I don’t know. Merely for the sake of talking, I suppose. I am not above that womanly weakness.’

‘I have thought, since I have been here, that you had got altogether above it. It seems as if I had hardly heard your voice: you are so unusually silent and reserved.’

‘I have had a great sorrow, you must remember, Mr. Charteris, and I cannot yet laugh and talk as I used to do.’

‘Ah, how you used to laugh in the old days! I fancy I can hear you now! Hilda, do you ever think of that time, and of the hours we spent wandering up and down the Crystal Palace Gardens together? How beautiful those gardens were! They have nothing like them abroad, unless we except

the grounds at Versailles, after which, I believe, they were modelled.'

We were getting on dangerous ground now, and I felt it. I had no desire to renew anything like a sentimental flirtation with Mr. Charteris; the scar, which his past conduct had left upon my heart, though now painless, was too deep for trifling even with memory; and therefore I did my best to turn the conversation.

'Ah, Versailles! I have never seen those gardens, though I have heard so much about them. I am a great ignoramus, Mr. Charteris, you must know, in all things connected with travel. This is actually the first time I have ever set my foot out of England!'

'So much the better! You have all your pleasure to come, instead of having exhausted before you know how to appreciate it. I can well imagine how an intelligent mind like yours will expand beneath the wonders of

nature and art with which it has still to become acquainted. You are marvellously young and fresh for your age, Hilda.'

'You are the first person who has ever said so. I think, on the contrary, that I am marvellously old and used-up. To judge from my general feelings, I might be sixty.'

'Just at present I dare say you might. You must have felt your late loss terribly!'

My lip trembled, and I turned away from him. I could not have answered even 'Yes' at that moment without breaking down, and I would have died sooner than break down before Cave Charteris.

'I can't tell you what a shock it was to me to hear it!' he went on softly. 'It seemed to revive the past, and bring it back as if it had occurred only yesterday. She was always good and kind to me, and you too, Hilda—indeed, I used to dare to think at

that time that you regarded me as a *very dear* friend.'

He used to dare to think! He cast his calculating untrue eyes upon me as he spoke ; and I knew that he remembered as vividly as I did, and was only trying how far he could impose on my credulity and make me think him blameless. The idea nerved me for action. Had I followed the bent of my inclinations, I should have hurled indignant reproaches on his head, and made him, in consequence, believe that his conduct had still the power to pain me. But I stamped on my inclination, and answered him as coolly as if the subject were of the utmost indifference, and revived no recollections whatever, pleasant or unpleasant, with regard to himself.

'And so I did,' I replied. 'I had so few companions of my own age at Norwood, I remember hailing your advent as a perfect

godsend. It was a very dull place for a girl to live in, particularly in the quiet way we used to do.'

'I never thought it dull,' he sighed—'that is, when I was with you.'

'Oh, you forget! It happened such a long time ago! But I can remember some very dull afternoons we spent there, when the roads were all mud and it rained continuously, and we had no resource indoors except playing at cards and singing over those eternal old songs of mine.'

'You never sing now,' he said eagerly. 'How charmed I should be to hear some of the dear old songs! Won't you sing them to me, Hilda?'

'No, I never sing now, Mr. Charteris. My voice is not strong, and I have too many other things to do.'

'You might sing for *me* though, just to revive that happy memory. I suppose the

reality will never come over again, will it?’

I looked in his face with well-feigned surprise.

‘How can what is past come over again? and with my dear mother gone, too! I think you are talking nonsense, Mr. Charteris.’

‘You must know what I mean. Will the old feelings we had for each other never be revived?’

I knew as well as he did what he meant. He wanted to make love to me again—to make me believe once more that his soft tones and looks and words were good for what they seemed. But the spell was broken, the old glamour had faded away. I saw him as the world saw him, and I was not to be taken in a second time.

‘I don’t see that they want reviving, Mr. Charteris. We liked each other very well

then, and I suppose we like each other very well now. We haven't quarrelled, have we? Perhaps I am a graver woman than you expected to see; but five years is a long interval, you know: and it is more likely you have forgotten what I was, than that I have altered as much as you seem to suppose.'

'You don't see it in the same light as I do,' he said, with a deep sigh that he pumped up from the lowest depths of his waistcoat.

He wanted me to blush and look conscious and uncomfortable, and then he would have seized the opportunity to swear he had been loving me through all the period of our separation, and should be miserable until he heard that I loved him in return.

But with all his desire to get up a small excitement, wherewith to while away the hours when he could not be shooting in the forest of Piron, Mr. Charteris was not so foolish as to commit himself where there appeared no

chance of remunerating his trouble ; and so he gave me up as a bad job, and, with a gesture of impatience, resumed the study of his French novel. But I would not leave one stone unturned by which I thought to convince him that he was utterly mistaken in thinking I had ever given a second thought to his heartless desertion of me.

‘How is your cousin Fred Stephenson, Mr. Charteris?’ I asked, with a jaunty air.

‘Oh, he’s well enough,’ he replied sulkily.

‘I thought you were going to ask him over here for a day. I wish you would—I should like to see him again. He seemed such a nice pleasant boy. I took quite a fancy to him.’

‘And I suppose you are afraid, if you don’t see him soon, that your fancy will evaporate. It is “out of sight, out of mind” with you, Miss Marsh, like the generality of women.’

‘Well, you wouldn’t have me in the

minority, would you? I always stick up for my sex, and have no desire to fare better than the rest of them. Since I am a woman, I'll be one all over. I don't like half and half animals.'

'You need have no fear of being mistaken for anything else, Miss Marsh. You have all the sex's attributes strongly marked upon you, even to asserting the right to change your mind as often as you choose.'

'I am so glad!' I said gleefully. 'I like to claim my privileges, and a masculine woman never gets any. But what has all this to do with your cousin Fred Stephenson?'

'Why, that as you have taken a fancy to him, I don't think I shall ask him over here. I am a sort of guardian of his whilst abroad, and he is of a susceptible age when the heart is more readily affected by unkindness and neglect than at any other.'

‘And you think I shall be unkind to the boy.’

‘I think you will be too kind, and then you will forget all about him. Some carrotty-haired creature will come in the way’—this was a hit at poor Charlie Sandilands, whose hair, *en passant*, was not a bit more carrotty than his own—‘and then Fred will be forgotten and left out in the cold, and will be as little able, perhaps, to read the meaning of the riddle as some other of your friends have been who have suffered a similar neglect at your fair hands.’

This was very pretty fencing, but I felt I must put a stop to it. It was becoming ridiculous to me, which was proof sufficient how entirely it had lost its sting.

‘Look here, Mr. Charteris,’ I said decidedly, ‘you can do as you like with regard to your cousin, but I wish you would not talk such nonsense to me. I have never left any-

body out in the cold. If you are alluding to yourself, all I can say is that I feel for you exactly what I did before'—I was really obliged to make a little reservation here, and whisper inwardly 'before you spoke to me to-day'—'we were always excellent friends in my dear mother's lifetime, and I have no wish to be less to you now. But it is hardly reasonable to suppose that during a separation of five years our tastes may not have grown a little apart. I don't say they have, but meeting as we have done is really like making a fresh acquaintance, and the old ground has to be gone over again. I wish you would believe, however, that I have none but kindly feelings towards you—why should I have?—and am quite ready to be as good friends as you are.'

I did it very well, I think, because the only effect my communication had was to turn him still more sulky.

‘ Pray don’t make any apologies,’ he replied, without looking up from his book ; ‘ I perfectly understand all you would say, and I think I perfectly understand you into the bargain.’

He was going to be rude now. Cave Charteris was the sort of man who becomes rude directly his self-love is wounded, and that is what I have never put up with from any one. So I gathered my work together, and walked out of the room with dignity, and did not return to it again until the sound of the girls’ voices assured me that I should not be left alone with Mr. Charteris.



CHAPTER III.


THE WOLF.

THE day wore on, and Charlie Sandilands did not come. I was standing at the window towards evening, wondering at his absence, and blaming my folly in having spoken to him as I did, when I perceived the white hat and red cherries of Miss Markham bobbing up the street. I had taken quite an aversion to this woman. I had detected her in so much falsehood and exaggeration, and I knew her to be so malicious and ill-natured, that I avoided her company when-

ever it was possible to do so. I should have been obliged, however, to live in my bedroom had I contrived to elude her altogether ; for hardly a morning passed without her spending two or three hours at our house. The only days she did not honour us were those on which she knew that Mr. Charteris would be shooting in the forest. On his fishing excursions she was almost sure to track and follow him. When her dear friend, Mrs. Carolus, had told me that her conduct with this gentleman was a scandal, I had been quite unable to believe that any woman of middle age and mediocre attractions could possibly be so foolish as to think herself capable of touching the heart of a young, handsome, worldly man like Cave Charteris. But it was easy for any one to believe it now.

I had seen Mr. Charteris laugh at or repulse her, just as the humour took him ; but, apparently impervious to either ridicule or

rudeness, she still pursued him, in-doors or out of doors, although he often put on his hat as soon as she appeared, and left the house by the back way. To Tessie, and Ange, and myself, Miss Markham had become a perfect nuisance, for, wherever she might be, she monopolised the conversation, which always ran in the most egotistical manner on herself, her admirers, and her triumphs. Mr. Lovett was the only creature who welcomed her; and whether it was that they were equally vain, self-seeking, and fond of flattery I know not, but they always seemed to get on together. The old man continued to affirm that Miss Markham was one of the most intelligent and agreeable ladies he knew, and she never lost an opportunity of lauding his personal merits and his talents, or of rebuking the girls for not paying him sufficient attention. Until at last I began to fear whether she might not turn the foolish old



man's brain to that extent that he would really imagine his daughters were not as devoted and loving and obedient as they possibly could be.

It had become a joke with Tessie and Ange and me to give Mr. Charteris warning of Sophy Markham's approach, but I was angry with him and angry with myself that evening, and I watched the bobbing cherries draw nearer and nearer without saying a word. So she was flung into the midst of us like a grenade.

'How d'ye do! how d'ye do! to everybody,' she exclaimed, nodding to the company in general, and then she pounced upon the unhappy Cave in particular. 'Ah! you naughty fellow, come and make confession of your sins at once! What did you mean by cutting me this morning after that fashion? I've a great mind to give you a dreadful penance, one that you will not forget in a hurry; only

you mustn't make those saucy eyes at me, or I shall forget all about it.'

'Cutting *you*, Miss Markham,' he replied with serio-comic gravity. 'How *can* you think so? Where was it, and when?'

'Where indeed?—why, close by the *Grotte de S. Jean*, of course. Now don't pretend you didn't see me, because I know you did. You began to run directly I turned the corner.'

'That must be a mistake! I never run.'

'Well, you walked very fast then, so fast that I couldn't overtake you. And you dropped a rose-bud from your button-hole in your flight, and I picked it up, and here it is,'—displaying it in the bosom of her dress—'and you shan't have it back again,' with infantine fervour, 'no! not if you begged on your bended knees for it, you naughty boy! So there—there!' ended Miss Markham

playfully, as she struck his face two or three times with the flower which she had taken in her hand.

‘I believe you’ve put my eye out,’ he said quite crossly, as he covered the injured member with his hand.

‘Oh, poor little eye! let me see,’ cried Miss Markham, as she bent over his chair. ‘Shall I try and make it well again?’

‘No! leave me alone!’ he answered, in a tone which caused even her unsensitive cheek to grow red as she attempted to cover her confusion by addressing herself to the rest of the party. ‘Dear Mr. Lovett! I have not spoken to you yet. But I always keep the best to the last, you know. You’re my *bong bouche*! How tired you look this evening. Tessie, you should take more care of your papa! I don’t at all hold with running after poor people and forgetting those at home.’

‘I hope we don’t do that. Do we, papa?’ said Tessie, with her quiet smile.

‘No, my dear! certainly not! But I think I overwalked myself a little this morning. These warm days in autumn are more enervating sometimes than those of summer.’

‘But you shouldn’t overwalk yourself, dear Mr. Lovett, and you should have broth or something good prepared for you against your return. Do you have broth made for your father, Tessie?’

‘Papa has everything he requires, thank you, Miss Markham,’ replied Ange, briskly. ‘If he asked for the Coliseum at Rome, Tessie would get it for him if she could.’

‘Ah! but you mustn’t wait till he asks for it. You should anticipate his wishes. That is not a very tidy fashion of wearing your hair, Ange. It is half-way down your back.’

'I know it is,' said Ange, bluntly.

'Go and put it up, my dear! go and put it up!' said her father, with kindly authority.

And the girl, little pleased at an order which had originated with Miss Markham, left the room with a lingering step and a grimace.

'I passed you last evening, Miss Marsh,' continued our visitor; 'but you appeared to be so *deeply* engaged that I wouldn't stop to speak, for fear of spoiling sport.'

'You were wise, perhaps,' was my reply.

'Not that I envied you your admirer, you know; he, he, he! He was rather too bucolic-looking for my taste. I should say he had never been farther than a turnip-field in his life before.'

'You're quite right, Miss Markham, as you always are.'

'Well, my penetration is not often in fault.'

‘I am sure of it! Considering that Mr. Sandilands is a regular cockney and has lived in London all his life, you ‘have made a first-rate shot!’

She reddened somewhat and began to sniff, after a peculiar manner she had whenever she found herself in the wrong.

‘Ah, well! his looks belie the fact, that’s all! if it *is* a fact. Is that little black monkey off your back yet, Mr. Charteris?’

‘I am not aware it was ever there, Miss Markham.’

‘Never mind; we won’t say anything more about it, but make it up next time we are alone. Have you heard the last rumour about those dreadful Johnstones, Mr. Lovett? They actually say that she was nothing but a milliner’s apprentice, whom he picked up in the streets carrying a bandbox in her hands. What shall we come to next, I wonder, when

such creatures are permitted to move about society without being labelled ?

At this juncture I slipped out of the room to put on my hat and see if I could shake off some of the unholy influence this woman shed around her, in the open air. As I passed through the garden and quietly unlatched the gate, a figure started up from the shadow of the wall as if to join me. It was Mr. Charteris.

‘May I walk a little way with you, Hilda, and smoke my cigar in your company ?’ he asked.

‘No, thank you,’ I replied abruptly. ‘I would rather not.’

‘Yet you spent two or three hours in Mr. Sandilands’ society yesterday,’ he said, with a reproachful air.

‘I know I did ; but I had not seen him for some time, and we had much to talk of. To-night I would rather be alone.’

‘As you will. I have no desire to intrude my company upon you. *Bon voyage!*’

I saw he was offended, but I could not help it. The conversation we had held that morning was too fresh in both our minds. He would have renewed the subject, which, as far as I was concerned, was exhausted. I had nothing more to say about it, and I feared lest in discussion I might be led to betray my past regard for him. Besides, although I wished him no harm, I did not consider that Mr. Charteris’s behaviour to me entitled him to rank as one of my friends. He had proved himself false, fickle, and cold-hearted. No man can have worse attributes for any position in life. He was not worthy of any woman’s confidence or regard, and I was quite sure he could never have more from me than my acquaintance.

It was a luscious, balmy evening, with just sufficient coolness to make walking a

pleasure, To leave the clang of that woman's tongue behind me, and to encounter the soft stilly atmosphere, was like entering a church from a public-house. I breathed more freely as I found myself alone, at liberty to think without disturbance. It was but just six o'clock. The shadows had not yet fallen to blot out the beautiful, delicate hues of the wild-flowers that bordered the roadway; nor to hush the evening hymns of the birds that were singing from every bough.

I would not take my favourite walk, which led towards the Château des Roses, because I was alone, and a silly fear of ridicule from Tessie and her sister always made me avoid anything that looked like a desire to meet the Baron de Nesselrode. So, as soon as the house I had quitted was out of sight, I struck up a side-path which led in the opposite direction and towards the forest of Piron.

This forest, which has been rendered so celebrated by poets and writers of romance, is still the great point to which the eyes of all sportsmen in the Wallon are lovingly directed, although the march of civilisation has here, as everywhere else, driven the larger game farther and farther back into the recesses of their covert, until it is now as difficult to find them as it was once to extirpate them.

Many stories had been told me of the difficulties encountered even by the royal sportsmen of the realm, in their desire to obtain good specimens of wolves, boars and wild turkeys from the forest of Piron ; and Armand de Nesselrode had been quoted in my presence as the most successful hunter that had been known to penetrate it. The floor of his hall at the château was covered with wolf-skins, the contemplation of which had more than once made me shudder as I

thought of the risks he must have run in procuring them.

Cave Charteris and he were constantly together at this time, shooting on horseback and on foot, and the bags of small game which the former used to bring home for our table proved that there were plenty of other marks in the forest besides those dangerous wolves and thrice dangerous wild boars.

I knew the road to it well. It was lonely ; but we never associated danger with loneliness at St. Pucelle ; and at one point of it there stood a wayside shrine, a pretty, romantic, ruined piece of architecture, that I had sketched more than once, and from which a narrow path led through fields of grass and turnips back to my home again.

The Piron road had not much in it to attract the eye before this little shrine was reached, and I walked along its side-path rapidly, as was my custom to walk when

alone, with my eyes cast down and my brain working away as fast as it could go, at every subject that passed through it.

I had left St. Pucelle a mile—perhaps a mile and a half—behind me, when something, I knew not what, impelled me suddenly to look up and scan the surrounding landscape. I had reached the centre of a long straight road, on either side of which ran a narrow footpath, fringed by the smallest of hedges, in many places trampled down by feet passing over it into the fields beyond. Not a tree sheltered the road anywhere, it was simply a highway to the next town. The dark mass of trees composing the forest loomed in the distance, but so far off as to appear like one clump against the greyish-blue sky of evening; behind me lay St. Pucelle, but I had placed a hill between us, and could only see the top of the spire of St. Marie and the wreaths of smoke that as-

cended from a little factory at the bottom of the town. I cast my eyes again in front. What was that dark figure advancing to meet me, that was sometimes in the light and sometimes in the shade, and seemed so uncertain in its movements and designs? Could it be a donkey? I smiled as the idea crossed my mind.

How could a donkey slouch in that absurd manner, and move with a shuffling, trotting gait, as though its shoulders were higher than its head! But the next moment I had turned as pale as death, and my heart almost stopped its beating from terror. Could it be—was it possible it could be—*a wolf?*

Directly I had conceived the thought I felt sure that I was right. Here, in the gloaming, without shelter of any kind, alone and unarmed, I was to meet one of these fearful beasts out of the forest, whose very names were sufficient to fill my breast with terror.

I don't think I ever felt so frightened in my life as I did at that moment. Where should I run? What could I do?

I looked across the fields on either side. They were sown with turnips, and stood upon a slope. If I attempted to plod my way through them I should only be impeding my progress, and making my presence more conspicuously apparent to the animal than it was now.

Was I deceiving myself through fear? I strained my sight again to make sure what it was that advanced upon me.

Oh! there was no doubt about it! I could distinguish the brute's appearance perfectly as he shambled along the pathway. And he was coming faster. He had broken into a swinging trot, with his nose to the ground. He had scented me, there was no hope but in flight.

All this, which takes so long to write, had

‘*Sacré*, Mademoiselle! you are correct. Something does advance this way.’

‘I told you so!’ I exclaimed, in a fresh paroxysm of terror. ‘Oh! leave me, monsieur, leave me! Run for your life—it is impossible both of us can be saved.’

‘*Je ne veux pas te quitter*,’ he answered, using the soft personal pronoun that with a Frenchman means so much; and then he shouted aloud: ‘*Hillo! hillo! à bas la! Hillo!*’

‘You cannot frighten it away,’ I said imploringly. ‘Oh, go—for my sake! Armand, pray go!’

‘It is not a wolf at all, mademoiselle,’ he replied calmly. ‘I see it now plainly, but I do not wonder at your taking it for one.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘One of our half-bred sheep-dogs finding his way home to his master. See! here he comes. He is about to pass us. Do not

tremble any longer, mademoiselle. Your enemy has just trotted by, looking like a veritable wolf indeed, and very much ashamed of himself for doing so.'

I glanced up, and there, shambling along the road peaceably enough, but looking very dangerous notwithstanding, with his huge size, rough coat and glaring red eyes, was one of those creatures, half-wolf, half-dog, which the shepherds of the Piron prize so much as guardians of their flocks against the very animals from which they sprung.

'What must you think of me?' I said, as the huge brute shuffled out of sight, and I remembered what an exhibition I had made of myself.

'I think that you are a brave woman who would have persuaded me to save myself, and leave you to what you believed would prove a terrible death.'

'I hope I said nothing absurd—I entirely

forget what I did say,' I stammered, with vivid consciousness that I had called him by his Christian name. 'And all for a stupid sheep-dog, too; I am so ashamed of myself.'

'But you are trembling still, and you must sit down for a little while before you attempt to return to St. Pucelle. Do you often take such solitary walks, mademoiselle?'

'Yes, I like to walk alone, and I did not think there could be any danger.'

'Neither is there. These dogs look very formidable, but they have never been known to attack anybody unprovoked. The next time you meet one, all you have to do is to stand aside and let him pass.'

'Oh! I hope I shall not meet another,' I said, shuddering. 'I do not like them. We have no such dogs in England, and I shall never forget the fright it gave me.'

Monsieur de Nesselrode had selected a grassy knoll by the roadside for me to rest

upon, and my heart was beating more in its proper time. What a difference a few seconds had effected in my feelings! A minute ago I firmly believed myself to be in the jaws of death. Now it seemed as if nothing could have the power to hurt or alarm me. I turned towards Armand de Nesselrode gratefully.

‘I wish you would not look so pale,’ he observed; ‘you are not still frightened, I hope?’

‘Oh no! that is all passed away, and I am quite at my ease again. How good it was of you, monsieur, to stand by me as you did.’

He smiled at me. His was such a beautiful smile. It came rarely, but when it did, it lighted up all his features like a glory. There was no mirth in it—I think self-reproach at that period had chased away from his spirit all the merriment which later I saw

shine forth—but it was thoroughly appreciative and genuine. On the present occasion his smile seemed to say much more than he chose his lips should utter.

‘You will not let me thank you,’ I continued, ‘but I must. Thank God! my fears were not well founded, and we did not both perish. For I feel you would have died sooner than let me be torn from your grasp.’

‘Of course I would!’

‘Oh! I think a brave man is the most wonderful and beautiful thing God ever made. Why should you have sacrificed your life for me, of whom you know nothing?’

‘It would have been my duty to lay it down under such circumstances, mademoiselle, for any woman—and of all women——’

But here he stopped short, as though ignorant how to finish his sentence, and I did not see the way to help him. Presently he began again :

‘You were good enough to say once, mademoiselle, that it would interest you to hear the means by which I was brought down to my present position. Shall I tell you the story now?’

‘Do, monsieur,’ I said, turning my eyes upon him.

He was seated at a little distance from me, with both his hands between his knees, digging up the earth under his feet with the light cane he usually carried. His eyes were downcast, and I noticed the length of the dark lashes that lay upon his cheek, and contrasted with the grave pallor that seemed suddenly to have overspread his countenance. Whatever this story might be, it was evidently hard to tell, and I prepared myself to hear a confession of much folly and evil, and perhaps—dishonour. Should I like him the less, I asked myself, when his tale was finished?

I did not believe I should like him the less. I felt so confident that whatever his sins might have been, Armand de Nesselrode possessed the power of rising above them.



CHAPTER IV.

THE BARON'S STORY.

‘I AM afraid you will weary of me before I have finished my recital,’ commenced the Baron.

‘I shall not weary, monsieur,’ I answered simply.

‘You will keep my confidence, I know! This is the first time I have ever told the history of my folly to a living creature.’

I wondered for a moment, then, why he should have elected to tell it to me. But he

went on too rapidly for me to put the question to him.

‘I have never had the happiness to possess a mother, a sister, or even a female relation sufficiently near to whom I could confide my sorrows or my perplexities. From a little child I was brought up in the society of men, and taught, as far as possible, to guide myself. That circumstance has been a terrible drawback to me, mademoiselle.’

‘Yes—so long as you were a little child.’

‘And not afterwards?’

‘Not so much afterwards! The mother is the God of the child, monsieur, and if a boy has a good, true, pure-hearted mother who loves him, he can have no better friend nor *confidante* than herself, until he becomes a man. But then their positions should alter. The *man* who leans upon his mother is a milksop. He should be her protector—her guide—even her counsellor. It is thus that

women are rewarded for the care and pains with which they have watched over the infancy of their little ones.'

'How true a woman you are!' he said, earnestly.

'I hope so, monsieur! I should be sorry to deserve any other name. But we are wandering from your story.'

'My mother died when I was quite a baby. She was very beautiful, and my father, who held a high position at Court, was so distracted by her loss that he threw up his appointment, left all his friends, and wandered for many years in foreign countries. Meanwhile, I was transferred from my nurse's arms to those of a private tutor, whose house I left only to go to college. I had an uncle on the mother's side, Le Sieur de Beaupré, the father of the cousin to whom I told you I was once betrothed. This betrothal was contracted when I was very young—not yet

sixteen, whilst Blanche had only completed her fourteenth year. We were betrothed with the consent and at the desire of my father, who was at that time wandering about the Brazils, and expressed his intention of not returning to Paris until I had passed through the *Athénée*, and was ready to be married. I had grown, therefore, up to eighteen years of age without ever having seen my father.'

'What a sad, desolate childhood!' I exclaimed; 'and how different from mine, monsieur! My father died, it is true, but my dear mother never left me, day nor night, from the hour of my birth. No wonder that you should have gone wrong, without affection, counsel, or home. Those who left you so are more to blame for what followed than you are.'

'You pity me, mademoiselle?'

'I do indeed! from the bottom of my

heart! I see you as a child and a growing man, lonely and unloved, and I could weep for the many desolate and unhappy hours you must have passed.'

'*Que le bon Dieu te bénisse!*' he said softly, as he lifted the hand that was lying idly on my lap to his lips, and let it quickly drop again. The action sent the blood rushing to both our faces, and for a minute or two we were silent altogether.

'Yes! I was very unhappy at that period,' continued the Baron. 'It seemed to me that Heaven was unjust in so unequally dividing its favours. I had every luxury, because my father was rich, but I would have exchanged them all for a caress when I went to bed at night, or for the touch of a soft hand upon my head. I saw other fathers proud of their sons, and I wondered what I had done that mine should never care to see or hear from

me, and scarcely took the trouble to write home to ask if I were dead or alive. Such thoughts embittered my mind and made it callous, and after I entered the *Athénée* and joined the wild band of students assembled within its walls, I soon became the wildest of them all, and well known to the authorities as a dangerous leader into all sorts of mischief. Why should I not be? what was there to restrain me? No mother's look of pain—no father's frown—nothing but a remonstrance from Monsieur de Beaupré, that my allowance did not last long enough, and that if I could not moderate my expenses he should be obliged to inform his brother-in-law. So things went on till I was twenty-one, when the news reached Paris of my father's death. I came into my title and my fortune, and was considered to be one of the best matches in Paris. But, mademoiselle, I am fatiguing you. Why should I be so vain

as to imagine that all these paltry details can hold any interest for you?’

‘Indeed, monsieur, I am deeply interested. Pray believe me when I say so.’

‘Why should I tell this tale of folly and dissipation to you?’ he went on, musingly; ‘I knew I should have to confess it some day, to the woman I should make my wife—if such an event ever happens—but I never thought to disclose it before. *Hélas!* this world brings strange things to pass! As soon as my uncle Beaupré heard of my father’s death, he tried to persuade me to complete the marriage with his daughter at once, but I was averse to the idea of tying myself down so soon, and refused to do so until the time named in the contract, which was on the attainment of my twenty-fourth year. I left the *Athénée*, of course, and settling in my own *hôtel*, on the Boulevards des Tuileries, plunged, with the aid of my

old college companions, into every sort of dissipation. Will mademoiselle pardon me for mentioning such a thing?’

‘We are better used to the mention of it in England, monsieur, than your ladies are in Paris, although we recognise its necessity less, and deplore its existence more. We Englishwomen are permitted to know that our men lead very different lives from ourselves, but we are taught at the same time that, for that very reason, it behoves us to be all the purer and more discreet, in order to win them back to a right and virtuous living.’

‘And you do so win them! In all the world there are no such lovers of domestic life as there are in England.’

‘I believe it,’ I answered, for I am very proud of and very devoted to my own country-people, whatever friends I may have found in other nations.

‘ I am speaking now, mademoiselle, of ten years ago — when the first notes of that terrible discord that shook France to her foundations were beginning to be heard, and Paris was in a state of ferment and expectation. The revolution had not commenced, but disaffection was already pre-evident amongst the labouring classes, and *émeutes* and brawls were of hourly occurrence in the city. It was on the occasion of the last night of the old year, which devotees celebrate in the churches and roysterers in the streets. I was returning home after the theatre with some of my friends, about the hour of midnight mass, when, just outside the church of the Madeleine, I saw a young girl standing up against the wall, and prevented from passing on her way by a band of tipsy artisans who surrounded her, calling out, “ *A bas* the aristocrat ! ” — “ Pull off her hood and rub her face in the mud ! ” — “ Down on

her knees and make her pray for the *bonnets rouges!*" and other phrases of similar import. You may suppose that was more than I and my friends could stand, and we went at once to her rescue. The poor child caught hold of my arm, crying, "Oh! save me, monsieur; I am no aristocrat. My father is a commoner, and lives but a couple of streets from here." A few blows and rough words soon dispersed the rioters, and I took the young lady home under my protection. I found that her name was Corinne Duplat, and her father was a man of letters. She was very beautiful——'

'Oh yes, I know! You needn't tell me,' I interrupted him, impatiently. 'She was the loveliest creature you had ever seen, and you became enamoured of her at once. You can skip all that! I have heard it so often before.'

The Baron fixed his dark eyes upon me

with an expression of the greatest surprise. After all my amiability and interest, he did not know what to make of the sudden change. I suppose I looked as sulky as a bear, for he immediately began to apologise.

‘I felt I should weary mademoiselle. Let me say no more than to thank you for the patience with which you have listened to me.’

But this was not what I wanted.

I sat there, biting my lip and feeling very much as if I should cry; whilst Armand de Nesselrode looked deeply annoyed and a little bit wounded.

‘I have abused your goodness,’ he continued, ‘and I shall never forgive myself.’

‘No, no, monsieur! Do not think so. It was only because I was in such haste to hear the end of the story. Go on about Corinne!’

She was very beautiful, and you loved her!

‘I *thought* I loved her,’ he corrected me, gently. ‘I was very young and knew no better; I have found out since what true love is.’

‘Yes, monsieur?’

‘Her father neglected her dreadfully, and let her go anywhere alone, which is unheard of amongst young ladies in Paris. It was natural that after a while I should constitute myself her protector. She was only seventeen, and very fragile—almost ethereal in appearance; and when I had known her for about six months, I felt I should like to make her my wife. I forgot my betrothal to my cousin Blanche. All my wishes centred in the hope of marrying Corinne. I broached the subject one day to her father, almost timidly. He was taken aback by my communication.’

“Marry my daughter!” he exclaimed.
“You cannot know what you are asking for.”

“I know I am not worthy of her,” I began, but he cut me short.

“My dear Baron, such an alliance as you would offer Corinne is beyond all my hopes. But it is impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because she is doomed. She carries in her the seeds of a disease which must terminate her existence within a few years. She can marry no one.”

‘This intelligence was a great blow to me. I would not believe it—she looked so healthy, though delicate. I urged Monsieur Duplat to permit the marriage to take place, and I believe it would have been accomplished, had a sudden chill not taken the poor child off before another month was over her head.’

‘She is *dead!*’ I exclaimed, pity taking

the place of all other feelings. 'Oh, how you must have grieved for her!'

'Yes, I was very inconsolable for a time, and it was this grief, mademoiselle, that led to all my subsequent misfortunes. Monsieur Duplat was a *littérateur* whose very uncertain income was dependent on his humour for writing, and unfortunately his humour too often took the direction of drinking instead. In my sorrow for the loss of Corinne, I conceived the romantic idea of being a son to her father, and invited the old man to come and live with me in my hôtel. I had so much money, there was plenty for us both. Why should he not enjoy it also? Amidst all my former dissipations I had never been a gambler, and it was Monsieur Duplat himself who had on our first acquaintanceship introduced me to the gaming-tables of Paris. After he came to live with me, idleness and regret for his daughter's death seemed to

drive him to them oftener than before, and wherever he went I accompanied him. I felt reckless too at that time, and quite indifferent as to my future. I believed, like most young mourners, that I should never be happy again, and it did not signify what became of me. This is how I contracted the spirit of gaming. Two of us were drawing on my (apparently) inexhaustible fortune at the same moment, for you may be sure I paid all Duplat's debts before my own. My uncle Beaupré was not long in hearing of my lavish expenditure, and remonstrated with me in his daughter's name. But a devil seemed to have entered into me—and when I found that I had caused a large portion of my fortune to disappear, I attempted to remedy the evil by staking more recklessly than before. At last the crash came, and my eyes were opened. Monsieur Duplat had persuaded me to stand security

for an extravagant sum of money by which, as he said, he was to be made independent for life, and the day after he got it he decamped, leaving me in the lurch to meet all his liabilities as well as my own. The creditors swooped down upon me like birds of prey. I found that Duplat had procured valuables all over the town in my name, besides forging it for a large amount of ready money from my bankers, and I was literally ruined.'

'What an ingrate!' I exclaimed. 'Oh, monsieur! I am sure that, with your generous spirit, the ingratitude of it was the hardest part to bear.'

'It was not calculated to raise my opinion of human nature, mademoiselle, and when I thought of poor little Corinne, and how it would have broken her heart to see her father's conduct to me, I was glad that she was safe in heaven, and freed from it all.

My uncle came to Paris as soon as he knew of my ruin, and informed me that all idea of a marriage between *mademoiselle ma cousine* and myself was at an end, which I was not sorry to hear. It was found that twelve years' income would only suffice to discharge the debts for which I was liable ; my estates in Versailles and Lausanne being entailed and consequently not marketable. I had the choice, therefore, of two alternatives—to expatriate myself to this place and live upon a yearly sum of six thousand francs allowed me by my creditors, or to go to gaol. I chose the former, though there is but little to choose between them. St. Pucelle is like a prison to me, and I have only vegetated since I came here. Conceive if you can, *mademoiselle*, the change from the life I led in Paris, and the solitude I now enjoy.'

'But it will not last for ever, monsieur.

How many years have you lived at the château ?

‘Nine. I was thirty on my last birthday.’

‘Then the time of your probation will soon be up, will it not ?’

‘There are three or four years more to run. *Three or four years ! Mon Dieu !* what an eternity it seems in prospect !’

I hardly knew how to answer him. I longed so much to give him comfort, but if he could not see the lesson this trial was calculated to teach him in the same light that I did, I feared my words might irritate instead of soothe him. So I only said :

‘Monsieur le Baron, don’t despair ! There is one person feels very deeply for you, and that is myself.’

‘You do not despise me, then ! You have heard all, and you can still be my friend.’

‘Most certainly ! You have been very weak, but you have not been wicked. The

money you wasted was your own. It was that base ungrateful creature Duplat that caused your ruin.'

'Remember that I have told it you in confidence. Even Monsieur Beaupré does not know the extent to which he robbed me. He was Corinne's father, and for her sake I wish, as far as possible, to spare him.'

'I respect you for the wish; but, monsieur, now that the worst is over, will you not take courage and look forward to the time that is coming, when you will begin life anew, and be able to show the world that you are capable of upholding the honour of your name and of your family?'

'These terrible years that must intervene,' he groaned. 'Sometimes I wonder if I shall live through them.'

'Oh yes, you will! You are young and strong. Why should you fear otherwise? I wish you were married, monsieur! and had

a nice wife at the château, to make it pleasant and cheerful for you. Then the time of waiting would not seem so long.'

'Where am I to find a wife, mademoiselle, who will consent to bury herself in St. Pucelle, on six thousand francs a year, for the next four years? Tell me, and I will offer her my hand and heart upon the spot.'

Now, I thought, is the time to put in a word for Tessie. His eyes have but to be opened to see all her virtues for himself.

'I know of several,' I answered confidently: 'sweet good girls, who would love you for your own merits, and care nothing about your money. There is Tessie Lovett, for instance. Where could you find a woman that would make a better wife than she?'

His face fell to about a yard long.

'Miss Lovett! the very pale one, you mean, with blond locks. Why, she is like

a statue, mademoiselle! She hardly ever opens her mouth. She has no spirit—no *chic* about her. I don't think she would brighten up the old château very much—nor me either, for the matter of that.'

Oh, the insolence of men! I really began to believe they were all alike, and never too miserable nor unfortunate to lose their self-conceit. Here was a young fellow, who had just acknowledged himself to be everything that was bad and wicked, and unworthy the regard of any woman, turning up his nose at one of the best and sweetest creatures God ever made, just because she had not got cheeks as red as peonies, and a tongue that clacked like a water-mill all day!

'Why, she is all the better for not talking!' I exclaimed indignantly. 'Do you mean to tell me that you like a woman who chatters like a magpie?'

'No, mademoiselle. But I like a woman

who can converse with me and sympathise with me ; who can scold me a little when I do wrong, and advise me for my good ; and who is brave and unselfish, and has been brought up by a good mother in whose footsteps she will follow.'

I blushed at this eulogium, because it sounded so much as if it was meant for myself. But I was true to Tessie notwithstanding.

'And how do you know, monsieur, that Miss Lovett is not all that you say?' I inquired.

'I do not know — but I have my opinions.'

'I thought you liked her so much,' I said disappointedly.

'So I do. But I will not *like* my wife, I will *love* her.'

'*Petite Ange* is more sprightly and talkative than her sister,' I observed.

'*Petite Ange* is a lovely child,' he answered : 'nothing more. She is open and innocent as the day. Any one might deceive her who had the mind to do so. She loves birds and flowers and the poor, and considers *monsieur son père* to be a saint from heaven. *Voilà !* that is *petite Ange*.'

'Do you think she will make the worse wife for being so sweet and innocent ?'

'Not for a good man, mademoiselle, who can guide her aright ; but I am a bad man who requires guidance. And the woman who can do that must be something very much higher and better than the ordinary run of women.'

'Oh, then you had better marry old Denise,' I said, out of patience with his trifling. 'She is old enough and steady enough to keep you straight, and as she whipped you when you were in petticoats, it will come quite naturally to her.'

How he laughed at the idea! I had never heard Armand de Nesselrode laugh before, but now his voice rang out sweet and clear along the deserted road, and woke the echoes in the hills beyond.

‘I am glad you approve of my proposal,’ I continued, fain to laugh with him, though I tried hard to prevent it.

‘Mademoiselle, you do me too much honour! I have never yet aspired to a Baronne de Nesselrode without a tooth left in her head. Now, have patience whilst I give you a description of the sort of woman I want to win for my wife.’

But something in his eyes alarmed me, and I would not let him speak.

‘No, no, no!’ I exclaimed hastily, as I jumped up from my grassy seat, and shook the dust from my skirts. ‘I don’t want to hear it, monsieur: I have not time. It is very late, and I must go home at once.’

What will they all say when they hear of my adventure ?'

' You must not come this way again alone, since you are easily frightened, mademoiselle. But if you will let me know—me only, you understand, it is not necessary we should tell our private affairs to all the world—when you intend to make your promenade upon the Piron road, I will take care to be within call—not to intrude upon your privacy, but to be ready in case you desire to appeal to me for assistance.'

Was he laughing at me, or did he imagine it possible I could permit him to follow at my heels like a dog or a lacquey, waiting to receive my orders ? I glanced up at his face, expecting to see a twinkle in his eyes which should prove he was only in jest, but they were solemn as those of a judge. The Baron de Nesselrode, in his beautiful chivalry and devotion to the weaker sex, had

been really in earnest in making this offer. But of course I rejected it.

‘It is impossible!’ I replied. ‘You must not dream of such a thing. You would set all St. Pucelle talking about me!’

‘You think I would be barbarous enough to take advantage of such a trust by forcing my conversation upon you! Ah, mademoiselle, you do me wrong! No saint in her niche could be farther removed from the annoyance of my presence than you should be, if you thought fit to accept my protection in your solitary rambles.’

‘But I shall not come this way again, monsieur, when I am by myself. And I could not think of putting you to all the trouble you propose. I am not used to be attended on, nor to have a *preux-chevalier* at my heels, thank you all the same for thinking of it!’

We were walking back to St. Pucelle to-

gether now, through the field-path that I have mentioned. It was a very narrow way; there was scarcely room sometimes for us to walk abreast, and our conversation was necessarily impeded.

‘I have not touched a card since the evening that we spoke of it together,’ said the Baron presently.

‘I thought so, monsieur, and I am so glad to hear it. I am sure you will never regret your determination. How do you employ your evenings now?’

‘I read and write and smoke; but I am very lonely. Sometimes I almost think that I shall cut my throat.’

‘Hush! don’t say that! You hurt me.’

‘At first I considered the possibility of turning my talents, such as they are, to account, in any post of responsibility that a gentleman might accept. But whilst I remain under the black cloud of debt, there is

no chance of my procuring a Court appointment such as my father held; and the De Nesselrodes have never stooped to anything lower.'

'There is no "stooping" in honest labour, monsieur.'

'I believe you; but caste has its prejudices. No member of my family has ever been a tutor or a secretary; and if I became so, I should cut off all hope of reconciliation with my relations when my term of penal servitude is ended.'

'Cannot you write and employ your time in instructing or amusing others? You can see no degradation in that! Men of the noblest blood have been authors before now.'

'Oh yes! and raised themselves by the distinction. But one must have talents to shine before the world, and I am not clever.'

‘Are you not? Mr. Lovett considers you have a mind of a very high order, and having been intimately associated with some of the first in Europe, he ought to be a good judge.’

‘He flatters me. But if I have a mind, or any gift for teaching others, I know how I should like to employ it.’

‘In what way?’

‘You will not be offended, nor say I am very presumptuous?’

‘I think not.’

‘Then I should like to teach you how to speak French.’

If the evening shadows had not fallen by this time, the Baron would have seen that his remark made me redden. I knew I spoke his language with a horribly Anglicised accent, but I was ashamed to be told so.

‘I am quite aware I pronounce it like a barbarian,’ I said bluntly.

‘ Ah, mademoiselle, now I have offended you. You do not speak it like a barbarian. Your voice is very sweet, and makes every word that comes from your mouth sweet also. But there are certain little niceties, the lights and shades of our language, that it is impossible to acquire except from conversing with a Parisian ; and it is on these points, unnecessary as they may appear, that I should like to see you perfect. There is so little to correct, it is but a word or an expression here and there that betrays you have not acquired the language abroad ; and since I know you have the ambition to speak it well, I thought, if you would permit me, to aid you——’

‘ Monsieur !’ I interrupted him, for my false shame had evaporated by this time, ‘ pray say no more. I know that my accent and my grammar must set your teeth on edge every time you hear them, and it is very good of you to wish to correct them. I am infi-

nately obliged, but what am I to say about it? What would your relations think if they heard that a De Nesselrode had turned French tutor to a raw English girl?

‘Let them say what they will! Only say yourself that I may give you a few lessons.’

‘But where am I to take them?’

‘Here—anywhere—so it be out in the beautiful country, with the blue sky over our heads and the flowers springing around us, and not shut up in a dull room in the house.’

This seemed so much like making appointments with him, that I hardly knew what to answer.

‘I cannot agree to meet you at any particular time, monsieur, without telling my guardian. It would not be *comme il faut*. We English girls are allowed more liberty than our French sisters, but to make appointments with gentlemen without the knowledge of our friends is going a little too far. If we

meet by accident, however, I shall always be glad to take any hints you may be good enough to give me.'

'I will walk about every day and all day till I *do* meet you,' he replied fervently.

I laughed, but I felt flattered. Why should Armand de Nesselrode take such an interest in my rough unmusical tongue ?

'And what are you going to charge for your lessons ?' I asked him jestingly ; 'I am not very rich, you know, so you must not lead me into extravagance.'

'*What am I to charge for my lessons !*' he repeated after me slowly. 'Ah ! mademoiselle, the price will be very, *very* high, but you shall take your own time to pay me.'

I was just going to ask what he meant, when we came within sight of another couple advancing to meet us. Not really to meet us though, but creeping slowly along the pathway deeply engaged in talk, with their

heads close together and their eyes cast on the ground. The Baron and I were walking one after the other, duck fashion, but our two friends were side by side.

‘It is Monsieur Charteris!’ exclaimed my companion, who had the eye of a hawk.

‘Is it?’ I returned incredulously. ‘Are you sure? Who can the lady be?’

As I mooted the question, I thought of Miss Markham. I knew how silly and romantic she was, delighting in moonlight walks and secret assignations, and could imagine how she had waylaid Cave Charteris smoking under the garden wall, and dragged him out into the fields, with his will or against it. A man can hardly refuse a woman’s request point blank to her face.

Silly creature that she was! How could she possibly remain so blind to the fact that her attentions were not agreeable to him!

As I meditated somewhat in this strain,

we came right upon the opposition couple before they were aware of our propinquity, and I almost ran into Mr. Charteris's arms.

'Here is an encounter!' I said merrily. The woman by his side lifted her head, and, to my utter astonishment, I saw the beautiful face of Angela Lovett. '*Ange!*' I exclaimed, 'what are you doing here—where is Tessie? Why didn't she come with you?'

There was such a ring of wonder and, I suppose, dissatisfaction in my voice, that Mr. Charteris at once took up the cudgels in defence of his fair companion.

'I think we shall be justified in putting the same question, Miss Marsh. What are *you* doing here, walking alone with Monsieur de Nesselrode?'

'Oh! *our rencontre* was a mere accident,' I replied, with vexation. 'I was on the Piron road when I met a horrid animal, half wolf and half dog, and I thought it was a real

wolf and was terribly frightened, and the Baron happened to meet me, and so——'

'Oh! did you see one of those savage-looking sheep-dogs, Hilda dear!' exclaimed Ange, who appeared as ready as myself to drop the subject of the company she had been detected in keeping. 'I do not wonder it alarmed you. I was very nearly bitten by one once. It flew out of a cottage and attacked me. Papa was so frightened, he wanted to have it killed; but it wasn't mad, you know. The village children had been teasing it, and it took fright at a stick I carried in my hand. But I am surprised you have not seen one before. There are so many about St. Pucelle.'

She had left Mr. Charteris's side and linked her arm in mine, and she leaned on me with a confiding pressure which seemed to say, 'Don't tell of me.' I didn't quite like it, and yet it would have been hard to say why I

was annoyed, for Ange ran about St. Pucelle as she listed, and gave account of her proceedings to no one.

‘Where is Tessie?’ I reiterated, looking down into the soft violet eyes that were raised so confidently to mine.

‘At home, dear, reading to papa. It was so hot indoors, I thought I should prefer the fields.’

‘Did you come this way to meet me?’

‘No! I didn’t know where you were. Tessie thought you had gone to see Mrs. Carolus. It is more than two hours since you left home.’

I started guiltily. Put upon my oath to guess the time of my absence, I should really have thought it had been about thirty or forty minutes.

‘Let us go back as fast as we can then, Ange, or they will begin to think we have eloped altogether.’

We were both so evidently anxious to have nothing more said about the companions of our pilgrimage, that we talked on every subject but that of our evening stroll, and left the gentlemen to amuse each other in the rear whilst we scuttled home together arm-in-arm, like two rabbits that had taken fright and were hurrying back to the warren.

But after I had retired to rest that night, I could not help thinking of dear little Ange, and wondering how she came to choose Mr. Charteris for her cavalier. I supposed it was very natural she should do so. I had left him smoking sulkily under the garden wall, and when she came out for her evening stroll, he had probably proffered the same request to her that he did to me, and she could hardly have refused him. What nonsense it was to think twice about such a trifle! Yet I did think of it, many more times than twice.

Ange was too good and pious to derive

any harm from ordinary intercourse with Cave Charteris, whose opinions on most subjects would be more calculated, I thought, to shock than to charm her ; but she was very young and unsophisticated, and her father was far too careless of her. Yet what business was it of mine ? The fear of being thought meddling has more than once deterred me from doing what I considered right in life. It deterred me now.



CHAPTER V

THE BLACK CLOUD.

I FIND I have arrived at an epoch in my story—an epoch from which I can date a remarkable change in the character of my surroundings—I seemed to have got on the black books of the entire household. In the first place, Mr. Lovett had scarcely spoken to me since the day that I had extracted the twenty-five francs from him wherewith to pay my debt to Mrs. Carolus. Whether he considered my subsequent silence dangerous, or read a determination in my eye which did

not accord with his own intentions, I know not ; but he assumed a great distance towards me, and never addressed me except it were absolutely necessary. He did not parade his altered feelings before the others, but, all the same, they were evident enough to me. The studied politeness of his manner and the increased blandness of his tone, when we met in public, would have betrayed the truth of themselves to my understanding, had not the ominous silence that reigned between us, whenever we found ourselves alone together, made it still more patent.

My guardian's suspicions or distrust, however, did not seriously affect me. I had a rod in pickle for the old gentleman, and thought it just as well he should be a little prepared for what was coming. But I did think it hard that Tessie should avoid me.

Since the day that we had visited the Fro-

mards' cottage together, I had not breathed a word to her of the disclosures that had been made me there. Poor Guillaume had been taken to his last home. And the funeral *cortège*, followed by half the town, had passed our door without my making the slightest reference to the unpleasant topic which the sight brought to my mind. I had even listened with patience to the beautiful and touching discourse which Mr. Lovett had given us on that occasion, and in which he set forth the folly of the poor in not husbanding their resources against a time of want and emergency.

Tessie had looked painfully shy and uneasy, whilst her father bade us all pray for the bereaved widow and orphans, but I had stood the exordium manfully, although I could have boxed Ange's ears for dilating her eyes as though she were gazing at a saint from heaven.

Yet Tessie shunned my company in the most evident manner, and was very subdued, not to say melancholy, at all seasons. Why was it so? Did she suspect me of treachery, and was afraid that, notwithstanding my promise, I should enlighten Ange upon the subject? Or had her father represented my conduct to her in his own light, and made her feel resentment on his account? I could not tell. I only knew that something had arisen between us, and we were not on the friendly terms we had been hitherto. Mr. Charteris was another defaulter, though regarding his temper I troubled myself but little. My rebuffs of him, trifling as they were, had evidently upset his equanimity; and if a gentleman who omits none of the common courtesies of society can be called rude, I should have said that Cave Charteris's behaviour to me amounted to rudeness.

Anyway, from that day he devoted himself to outdoor amusements, and scarcely seemed to be in the house for ten minutes together. Last, but not least, dear little Ange began to brood and be melancholy, in common with the rest. The season was not a healthy one, and there was a great deal of fever and sickness amongst the poor people. Perhaps this somewhat accounted for the decrease of brilliancy in her eyes, and lack of power in her limbs. Her slight delicate frame was weakened by the long hot summer, and required the dry frost of winter to brace and set it up again. There was too much feverish colour, I thought, in her cheeks for health, and too much languor in her usually active body.

Tessie did not see it as I did. She said that St. Pucelle was always considered to be rather enervating in the autumn months, and Ange looked much the same as usual.

From the 'little maid' herself I could get no satisfactory information. She had become as shy of me as her sister, and seemed quite nervous of being left in the same room.

I began to think I must be a species of Jonah, got aboard by haphazard in this peaceful foreign ark, and that the sooner I was cast forth into the sea the better. Even Monsieur de Nesselrode appeared to have been frightened by my proposal to get him a wife, and to come less often to the house than before.

My only resource was Charlie Sandilands, who had, of course, reappeared upon the scene of action, faithful as ever. Charlie was just that sort of man who might be counted upon to reappear, never mind how often he was snubbed, always amiable and forgiving, and for that very reason he was the sort of man that I never could have submitted my judgment to.

But he was an immense comfort to me at that period, and having once thoroughly knocked the truth into his stupid old head that he could be nothing more, we got on capitally together, and scarcely passed a day without meeting, either in the house or out of it.

I had received an answer to my letter from Mr. Warrington; one that made me feel both comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. In it he had enclosed a draft for twenty pounds, with the intimation that for the next few weeks imperative business would keep him in London, but that as soon as it was concluded he should run over to St. Pucelle, and inquire into my money affairs himself.

Meanwhile, he trusted that what he sent would free me from any further annoyance until his arrival. This was just what I had dreaded; and had it not been for Charlie Sandilands, I should foolishly have written

written, and resolved to try and banish them from my mind.

Charlie had brought over several cheap novels with him for the nourishment of his mental appetite, and I had greedily pounced upon one of Miss Braddon's, and carried it off for my own delectation. I had met Ange dressed for walking as I entered the corridor, on her way to the kitchen to fetch the basket which she usually carried when visiting the poor, and I had remonstrated with the child for exposing herself to such heat, and prophesied all sorts of fevers and horrors for her if she insisted upon being so obstinate.

But she had only shaken her head at me in reply, and I had considered my good advice wasted, and made myself very comfortable in the society of Miss Braddon. I had heard light steps traverse the corridor and leave the house by way of the garden,

and thought what a little saint of love and charity the child was, and how far behind her I came in all things worthy of praise, when the latch of my door was softly raised (all the doors in St. Pucelle were latched instead of locked), and lo! the face of St. Ange, not pale but feverishly red, like the opened heart of a great crimson rose, was thrust silently into view.

‘Why, Ange! I thought you had left the house ten minutes ago.’

‘No, it was Tessie. I felt so tired that she took the basket from my hands and went instead of me. How cool you look in here, Hilda! The sun is glaring in on the other side of the house till it is like an oven.’

‘Come in then, dear, and sit with me. I have got one of the most charming stories that was ever written, here, and if you like I will read aloud to you.’

She almost dragged herself across the

room to where I sat. I saw at once that she was not well.

‘What is the matter, darling?’

‘Nothing in particular, Hilda. Only I have such a headache, and feel so tired.’

‘Take my chair, Ange; you will catch the breeze from the hill-top as it blows across the courtyard. It is deliciously cool.’

‘No, I would rather sit here,’ she answered, as she sunk down upon a stool at my feet and rested her head against my knee.

I read aloud for a few minutes, but I soon found that even Miss Braddon had not the power to-day to chain Ange’s wandering thoughts, which, it was plain to see from the expression of her dreamy eyes, were far away from the matter in hand.

‘Ange, you are very sad to-day. What makes you so?’

‘I *am* a little sad. Jeanne Guillot’s little baby Fanchon is dead, and I nursed her the

very day she was born. Such a dear, fat little thing she was, Hilda, and only just two years old. I feel almost as if she had belonged to me.'

'What did she die of?'

'I don't know—some kind of fever, I think. Several children in the town are ill with it.'

'Is it safe for you to go amongst them so constantly as you do, Ange?'

'Why?'

'The fever may be infectious—you might catch it yourself.'

'What then, Hilda? One can die but once, you know, and I often think those who die are much better off than those who are left in this world.'

'Perhaps so, but you are too young to believe it. You have all your life before you, child, and should look forward to a sunny one. Why, what has come to my light-hearted laughing Ange this afternoon?'

‘I have a headache,’ she repeated wearily.

I let her rest in peace then, though I could not help stealing an occasional glance at the marvellously pretty face that was pillowed on my knee. Was it my fancy, or had a look of greater age really come over Ange’s child-like features during the last few weeks? I thought her nose seemed longer and thinner than before, and that her brows were not quite so smooth and open as they had been. But it must have been my fancy, or the appearance was merely evanescent. No storm, domestic or otherwise, had occurred to ruffle the even tenor of her life. The unusual look of care must have been the effect of the headache only. It was she who broke the silence between us.

‘Hilda, are you going to marry Mr. Sandilands?’

‘Marry Charlie Sandilands? certainly *not*,

my dear Ange. Whatever can have put such an idea into your head ?

‘ Miss Markham said you were engaged to him.’

‘ What rubbish ! Pray don’t put faith in anything that woman tells you. She has no authority for her assertions. I am not going to marry anybody, Ange ; rest sure of that.’

I was vexed at this retailed piece of scandal, nevertheless ; though what else could I have expected at the hands of a set of chattering old women, who had seen me walking out every afternoon with the same gentleman ?

‘ I suppose I have no right to be angry,’ I continued ; ‘ but it is always vexatious to be talked about. I have known Charlie Sandilands for years, Ange. He is younger than I am, and I look upon him as a brother. Don’t let any one connect our names together again in your presence, will you ?’

‘No, I will not, Hilda. But I thought Mr. Charteris would be sure to know.’

‘You said Sophy Markham had been your informant.’

‘So she was, but when I repeated it to Mr. Charteris, he said nothing was more likely.’

‘Mr. Charteris ought to know me better,’ I returned, with ridiculous heat, considering that I had not condescended to inform that gentleman of any of my private affairs.

It seemed hopeless to engage in conversation that afternoon. Every subject we started came to a dead-lock, and I returned to my novel with an impatient sigh. Presently Madame Marmoret’s harsh voice rung out across the courtyard in expostulation with some one unseen.

‘*Eh bien!* you are there again, pig! Have you come to bring me what I asked for?’

‘Madame sweetly singing, as usual!’ I remarked, as the tones reached us.

I suppose my words drowned the reply to the woman’s question, for she continued rapidly :

‘Lies, as usual! I know you have it! I saw you borrow one hundred and twenty-five francs from Monsieur Sharteris this morning. It cannot be gone already. *Pauvre homme!* he has not yet found out what it is to lend money to those that will never return it!’

‘*Tais toi!*’ responded the voice of my guardian; ‘mind your own business. He will be repaid, never fear!’

‘Ah! yes, certainly, when the Lord comes to judgment,’ replied Madame, sarcastically.

Ange had not appeared to hear the first two sentences as she lay with her head upon my knee, her eyes closed and the deep crimson mantling on her cheek. But when her father’s voice was heard in answer, I

watched her colour fade to a dull white, and she opened her eyes and knit her brows as though she were listening with all her soul.

‘Hilda!’ she inquired eagerly, ‘is that papa’s voice?’

‘Yes, Ange, I think so.’

‘What was he saying?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t hear.’

She raised herself and looked at me in a scared, half-comprehending manner.

‘You are deceiving me, Hilda! You must have heard! What is it? What does it mean? Did Marmoret say that papa owed Mr. Charteris money?’

I remembered my promise to Tessie, and resolved that Ange should learn the truth through any lips but mine.

‘I know nothing about it, Ange,’ I repeated firmly; ‘you heard what passed just as well as I did. And if it were the case,’ I added, with beautiful inconsistency, ‘it is no such

great matter. Men borrow money of one another constantly.'

'*It is no such great matter!*' she repeated slowly; 'no matter that dear papa should be so poor as to be obliged to borrow of Mr. Charteris: papa, who holds such strict views on all money matters that he thinks people should lie down and starve sooner than beg or borrow of their friends. Oh! we must be very poor indeed—much poorer than I have ever dreamed of—if papa has been obliged to do this thing.'

I saw the proud blood rush back again to her face, though only for a moment, and thought, with a pang, what a blow the disclosure of the truth, when it came, would be to her! At that moment the bedroom door opened, and Tessie appeared. The sight of her sister seemed to rouse Ange to action, for she leapt to her feet and rushed into her arms, crying:

‘Tessie! Tessie! tell the truth. Does papa owe money to Mr. Charteris?’

Tessie looked over the child’s shoulder at me with a reproachful air, which I read too well.

‘You wrong me,’ I said, in answer; ‘I am not the delinquent. Ange has overheard your father and Madame squabbling in the courtyard.’

At these words Tessie’s face became as white as the ‘little maid’s.’

‘Why did I not tell Madame I was going to carry Ange’s basket to the poor?’ she said, with a self-condemnatory air.

I knew what she meant. That if Madame had known that *petite* Ange was anywhere within hearing, she would have placed some restraint upon her unruly tongue.

‘Well, it cannot be helped, Tessie; and, after all, Ange is making a great fuss about a very little thing. She merely heard Madame

say that Mr. Lovett had borrowed a five-pound note of his boarder.'

'Five pounds, Tessie; one hundred and twenty-five francs!' said Ange, with open eyes of horror; 'and how will he ever pay it back again, so poor as we are?'

'Oh! leave papa to find out the ways and means, darling,' replied Tessie, cheerfully; 'it is no concern of ours, you know, and he would not like, perhaps, to think that we knew about his private concerns.'

'That is just what I have been telling her, Tessie; but Ange is such a little goose, she seems to think five pounds a perfect fortune. Gentlemen constantly accommodate each other in such trifles. Mr. Charteris is sure to have his money back in a day or two, and, for my part, I think we have wasted too much time already in discussing the business.'

So I said, in my desire to reassure them both, but Ange still continued to look up in

her sister's face with wide, imploring eyes.

'Tessie, how can he pay him back? I heard papa tell the *facteur* this morning that he must wait till to-morrow for the money for the unpaid letter.'

'That was because he had no change,' I interposed quickly.

'Tessie, how will he ever be able to pay back five pounds?' continued Ange, without heeding my interruption; 'there are so many things to buy each day, and Madame killed our best pair of pigeons this morning because she had no money to go to market with.'

'Oh, Ange! you do not understand such things. You have had no experience. People may have very little money to-day and plenty to-morrow. It *comes in*, you know. The richest are sometimes out of pocket for a few days, aren't they, Hilda?'

‘Of course,’ I answered stoutly. ‘I dare say the Duke of Westminster has to borrow sometimes. The more we have, the more we spend. How very much amused Mr. Charteris would be if he could hear the debate we are holding over his stupid bank-note. By the way, is he home from shooting yet, Tessie?’

‘I don’t know ; I have not seen him,’ she replied, as she gently put her sister from her, and, walking up to the mirror, removed her hat and arranged her tumbled hair. Ange stood where she had left her for a few seconds motionless, and then, with a deep sigh, walked out of the room.

‘Oh, Hilda! how could you let her hear it?’ exclaimed Tessie, as soon as she was gone.

‘How could I help it, rather? If you will gag Madame Marmoret, or reduce her brazen clarion of a voice to whispering music, I may

be able to avoid such things, but not before.'

'How impudent of her to shout in that way across the yard, and why does dear papa provoke her tongue by infringing on her premises? Why doesn't he keep out of her way?'

'Don't ask me. Why does everything in this world go by contraries? The best thing we can do now is to try and make Ange forget what she overheard as soon as possible.'

'Oh! she is sure to forget it. After all, it is not much. The only thing is to prevent its leading to more.'

'You had better arrange that with Madame Marmoret, since she is at the bottom of all the mischief.'

When we met at the dinner-table I thought that Ange had already forgotten the little episode we had alluded to. The lovely damask colour bloomed once more on her

cheek ; her soft eyes beamed with light, and her manner to her father was even more tender and caressing than usual.

As soon as the meal was concluded, she perched herself upon his knee, and kept on fondling him to an unusual degree as she stroked down his silver locks, calling him 'Poor dear papa,' and 'Poor darling old father,' accompanying each phrase of affection with a kiss.

I fancied that Mr. Lovett palled of this excess of filial devotion, but the girl could not see it. Her little soft heart was full to the brim with compassion for what she considered the deplorable condition to which he had been brought, and she was powerless to perceive that his did not beat in unison with hers.

At last he twitched his venerable head from under her smoothing hands to turn it towards Madame Marmoret, who entered the



salle with a message from Jean Marat, the cobbler; a humble message, delivered in the most respectful manner, to the effect that if it were quite convenient to Monsieur le Curé, would monsieur oblige Jean Marat with a few francs—just a few francs—on account of his bill, because madame *sa femme* had laid-in that morning of the eighth little Marat, and money, under the circumstances, would be very acceptable.

To listen to Madame's oily voice at that moment, who would have dreamt it could ever be so harsh and virulent as we had heard it at other times!

She looked the personification of a respectable servant as she stood at the open door with her hands rolled up in her apron; and with all my dislike for the woman, I recognised something touching in the restraint she put on her naturally evil nature for the sake of *petite Ange*.

Mr. Lovett, however, saw nothing 'touching' about the matter. His brows contracted as the message was delivered to him, and he put Ange off his lap with a brusqueness that was almost rough.

'What do you mean by bringing such a message in to me in the midst of dinner?' he demanded. 'Tell Jean Marat to go——'

But there he remembered himself and came to a full stop. Whatever he may have been in private, he was always very particular in keeping up the name of his profession in public.

'Tell Jean Marat that it is *not* convenient, that I am occupied at present—and he must wait,' he continued, correcting the former sentence.

'If monsieur could spare but five francs,' pleaded Marmoret. 'The Marats are very poor.'

'*Ciel!*' exclaimed Mr. Lovett, losing his

temper entirely. 'What do you mean by talking to me in that manner when I haven't got a five-franc piece in the house? Give it to them yourself if you are so anxious for their comfort; but get out of this room, and leave me in peace to finish my repast.'

Madame Marmoret immediately disappeared, and harmony was restored amongst us. But an ominous silence succeeded her departure.

Tessie sat with eyes downcast upon her lap. Mr. Charteris whistled and looked out of the window. Ange seemed restlessly miserable.

The cause of the disturbance tried to cheer up the spirits of his family, but, finding his remonstrances of no avail, took his hat and stick discontentedly and walked off to visit some of his friends.

The girls disappeared together, as I thought, to their garden or the kitchen, and I

retreated to the inner *salle* to have another chat with Miss Braddon. When it grew too dusk to read I went upstairs, intending to finish some needlework or writing in my bedroom by the light of a little lamp which I had purchased for my own use with some of the money Mr. Warrington had sent me. But, passing the room occupied by the sisters, my attention was arrested by the sound of a low sobbing, and I entered it expecting to find my poor friend Tessie bewailing in secret the troubles she had to bear. To my surprise, however, it was not Tessie who was cast prostrate on the bed. It was Ange!

‘Ange, my child!’ I exclaimed. ‘What is the matter that you should weep like this?’

‘Oh! don’t speak to me, Hilda,’ she said mournfully; ‘leave me to myself. It seems as if a great black cloud had come down over everything.’

Poor Ange! Dear, innocent Ange!

So the curse had begun to work here also,
and her fresh young life was to be involved
in trouble like the rest.



CHAPTER VI.

SALLE DU SABBAT.

How we all came to visit the *Grottes de S. Jean* in one large party, I never quite made out, but the fact remains that we went. Some one proposed it, probably Miss Markham (for that gay young creature was always on the alert to concoct a plan by which she should secure the privilege of Mr. Charteris's company), and some one agreed to it, but neither of them was I.

I found myself one morning in the centre of a group consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Carolus,

Sophy Markham, Arthur Thrale and Charlie Sandilands, Cave Charteris, and Ange and Tessie, all habited in walking costumes, and armed with thick sticks, ready to start on an expedition to these famous grottoes of stalactites, and I was told to put on my hat and accompany them.

There was no particular interest to me in the expedition ; indeed, had I been given my choice, I would much rather have stayed at home on the chance of getting a lesson in French from the Baron de Nesselrode—the public will see that I am frank in these records, even to detailing my errors of judgment—but consciousness that it was so, and that I showed weakness in encouraging it, urged me to the opposite course, and I agreed, with alacrity, to do all that they required of me. So in a few minutes we had started on our way. Sophy Markham clinging close, of course, to Charteris's side, as Charlie Sandi-

lands did to mine, and the rest walking, as Ange expressed it, *heegledy-peeegledy*. How well I remember that morning: we were all so terribly young. Mrs. Carolus skipped round and about her Willy, whom, more than once, she nearly knocked over in her airy evolutions, as a bride of sixteen might have done; whilst Miss Markham hung upon Charteris's arm and gazed up into his face with the rapture of a first attachment. The boys caught the youthful infection, and raced Tessie and me down the green slopes we had to traverse, until I told them they reminded me of Greenwich fair. Of all the company only two seemed unequal to taking part in the general hilarity. These two were Cave Charteris and *petite* Ange.

He walked along with his head in the air, without appearing to take much interest in the conversation of his self-elected companion. Did he or did he not care for the attentions

which this woman was always pressing upon him? To love her I was quite sure would be impossible to him—the great difference in their ages alone would render it most unlikely—but he had certainly been more polite and amiable to her lately than he had ever been before.

What motive could he have for it? for I was certain Cave Charter is never did anything without a motive. Did he entertain any thoughts of marrying her? Miss Markham was reported at that time to have money, and Madame Marmoret had more than once openly expressed her disgust to see the lady's favours transferred to the wrong quarter. But Mr. Charteris had told me he was rich; he could never be so mean as to sell his liberty to an old woman when he was not even in want of pecuniary assistance. Yet on what other grounds, except the desire to ingratiate himself with her, could one ac-

count for his former rudeness being changed to a curt familiarity? The other dullard of our party, dear Ange, was not so melancholy as she was silent. The burst of grief she had given way to, now more than a week ago, had been succeeded by an unusually subdued manner—an *older* manner if I may express it so. It was as if the discovery of that day had swept her youth away before it. So I believed, at least, then—now I know that subtler influences were at work to destroy her gaiety.

I tried on that morning, by every means in my power, to make Ange like her former self, but it was in vain. She laughed, it is true, and when we pulled her down the steep hills, the crimson blood mantled in her peachy cheeks and made her beautiful, but there was a sense of care underlying the laughter that spoilt the joyousness of its echo, and the colour faded too fast after each

exertion to have been called there by healthy exercise.

The grottoes we were about to visit extended for a great distance under the grounds of Monsieur de Condé, whose property they were, and who charged a certain sum for admission to them. They had been discovered by some workmen whilst excavating on his estate, and had been quite a source of profit to their owner ever since. The visitors to St. Pucelle, naturally, had already heard a great deal about these famous grottoes, and Sophy Markham 'gushed' over them to her heart's content.

'Oh! I am so *anxious* to see them! I am anticipating so much pleasure from this little excursion!' she exclaimed, with a violent and most palpable squeeze of Mr. Charteris's arm. 'I have been looking over the book in the hotel where visitors have written down their impressions of them, and they are so terribly

tantalising. A Persian describes himself as having been suddenly transported into fairyland—didn't he, Lizzie dear?—positively into fairyland, and says he can compare the vast caverns to nothing but the palace of his great master the sultan, and the forms of the stalactites to lovely houris frozen around him. Isn't it poetical? *Frozen houris!* Oh! I do love poetry so! It is the very life of my soul.'

Tessie laughed quietly.

'I'm afraid if you do not lessen your anticipations, Miss Markham, that you will be disappointed. I went over the grotto years ago with some friends, but I saw nothing at all like "frozen houris" there.'

'Ah! but then, my dear Tessie, you are not imaginative. Now, I *am*. I always have been, and it is my *métier* to make the very best of everything I see. You don't

blame me for it, or think me foolish, Mr. Charteris, do you ?

Of course Mr. Charteris assured her that folly and herself were the two things in his ideas farthest removed from one another, and just as he had given vent to this opinion, we came in sight of the mouth of the grotto, where two *guides*, each bearing a petroleum lamp, awaited our arrival. They tendered us little hats made of grey linen, each trimmed with a cockade and a bunch of red feathers in front, very much after the pattern of those adopted by the monkeys on the organs, and for which we were expected to exchange those we wore, which were liable to be damaged by the drippings from the cave.

They were comical-looking head-dresses, and I hardly wondered at Mrs. Carolus and the fair Sophia hesitating to surmount their hard-lined and puckered faces by them,

although Ange and Tessie looked all the prettier from the contrast.

Miss Markham in particular, I could see, would rather have spoiled a dozen hats than assumed the unbecoming linen one, had she not been ridiculed into doing so.

‘Oh! Lizzie dear, we never *can* wear such things—now can we?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know, dear. I’d much rather keep on my bonnet, but then it cost five guineas, and I shall be crazy if it gets hurt. I really think I must venture to try one of the caps.’

‘Oh! my dear girl, you do look so comical! Excuse my laughing—but you’ve no idea—and grey never did suit your complexion, you know.’

‘Well, I don’t think you need talk, Sophy. So plain a headdress is by no means suited to your own style of features, I can tell you!’

'Oh! the horrid thing—I will never, never wear it!' cried the childish Sophia, as she threw the offending cap upon the ground; and I believe, if she had not overheard Mr. Charteris grumble at being kept waiting so long, that she would have been as good as her word.

But, finding that we were all wearing them and she would be singular if she did not do the same, she consented at last to crown her *chignon* with it, and came simpering forth like a bashful girl that was afraid of being looked at.

No one troubled her, however, and the whole party being ready, we began to descend the first flight of wooden steps which were steep but easy, and went down, down, down, until the ivy and fern covered entrance was left far above us, and we had reached the very centre of the cave, which was yet light enough to let us see that there were several

more such flights to be descended before we could touch level earth again.

This was a fine opportunity for Miss Markham and Mrs. Carolus to shriek and laugh hysterically, and cling like grim death to whoever happened to be nearest to them, and they made every use of it. But Mr. Charteris and Mr. Carolus had been wise in their generation, and insisted upon going down first, leaving their women-kind to struggle in the rear with any one they could lay hold of. So poor Charlie and Arthur Thrale had them all to themselves, whilst Tessie and I laughed wickedly in each others' ears.

At last we stood on level ground, in a cavern as dark as Erebus ; there was no light anywhere, except from the lamps of the guides, who waved them over their heads and introduced us to *la grande salle*. I looked up and down and round about me ;

but all was black as pitch. I felt that I was standing on broken flints and thick mud, and as the guides' lamps threw their faint gleam here and there, I perceived that the cave we stood in was very vast and damp, and uncommonly like a huge cellar, but I can't say that I saw anything more.

'Are these the "frozen houris?"' asked Cave Charteris, sarcastically.

'Oh no! I should hardly think so,' replied Miss Markham, quickly; 'and—where are you, Mr. Charteris? I feel so dreadfully timid, I can't tell you—and would give anything to have hold of the hand of some one that I knew!'

'Take mine!' I said, with *malice prepense*; 'it's quite strong enough to keep you from slipping.'

'Oh no! I couldn't think of it. I might fall and pull you down with me. But if Mr. Charteris would help me——'

‘All right! You can take my arm if you wish it. But we can’t walk abreast through the passages,’ he answered, with anything but lover-like alacrity, and something made me turn to Ange and whisper :

‘Are you not frightened, dear, too? If so, I can hold you up.’

But she said calmly :

‘There is nothing to be frightened of, Hilda. We are on the solid ground now, and can fall no lower.’

In another minute the guides had turned and led us through a passage cut in the rock. We were not going up nor down stairs now, but picking our way over slippery stones, and between places sometimes so narrow and so low, that gaunt Mr. Carolus knocked his head more than once, as he disregarded the guides’ warning cry of ‘*Tête!*’ and the majority of us got bruised arms and shoulders. Every now and then we came upon a larger

excavation which was called a *salle*, and bore some name consequent on the likeness assumed by the stalactites it contained. One was termed *Salle de Brahma*, because it held a lump of crystal somewhat resembling the idol of that name. Another *Salle du Sacrifice*, its principal attraction being a large flat stone, at the foot of which was another, shaped like a sausage and entitled *tombeau de la victime*.

We paced after the guides through these cavernous passages for what appeared to me to be miles, my mind, meanwhile, being divided between fear that I should leave my best pair of boots behind me in the slushy clay, and apprehension as to the appearance my crape would present when I reached home again. I heard Mrs. Carolus, every now and then, querulously complaining to 'Willy' of the pains she was acquiring in her back from the constant stooping, and I

knew that Sophy Markham was dogging Mr. Charteris's steps as closely as the circumstances would admit of, and that Tessie and Ange plodded behind me silent and uncomplaining.

I was beginning to think that we had come on a very foolish expedition and were likely to have more pain than pleasure for our trouble, when I found we were ploughing our way up again, on fungus-covered ladders and wet slippery stairs upon which it was most difficult to keep a footing, until we arrived at what was decidedly the finest sight there, the *Salle du Sabbat*. Here the guides proposed to send up a spirit balloon, in order to show us the height and extent of the vast cavern, and went away, taking the lamps with them, having first planted us in a row on the edge of a precipice, and conjured us not to stir until their return. I think we felt little inclination to do so. The

blackness about us was so thick that we could almost *feel* it, and the silence was that of death. Ange slipped her little hand in mine, and whispered :

‘Hilda, suppose they should never come back!’ and I could not say the supposition was a pleasant one. She had been standing between Sophy Markham and myself, but as she said the words, she slipped round my back and linked her arm in mine on the other side.

Miss Markham, for a wonder, was silent, but Mrs. Carolus was plaintively trying to make her spouse partake her girlish fears, and he was ridiculing them with a kind of rough good sense that made me laugh. Under cover of their expostulations with one another, a mouth approached my ear on the side left vacant by Ange, and I heard a voice say gently :

‘My own darling! How much I love you!’

The announcement took me so completely by surprise, that, for the moment, I imagined it had proceeded from Charlie Sandilands, and it was quite a mercy that, under cover of the darkness, I did not turn round and smartly box his ears in return for his impudence. But before I had had time to prepare the weapon of chastisement, the speaker continued, still in the same soft tones :

‘What a nuisance it is having to play propriety before all these bores! How I long to be alone with you again, and able to tell you what I feel!’

Before this sentence was concluded, I had recognised the voice as that of Cave Charteris, and was bristling with indignation.

‘What do you mean by speaking to me like that?’ I said angrily.

‘Good God, Hilda!’ he rejoined, ‘is it you?’

‘Yes, it is I! Who did you take me for?’

‘Then—where—where—’ he stammered, in order to give himself time to think of what to say, ‘where is Miss Markham?’

We had both raised our voices in our mutual surprise, and his last question was overheard.

‘Here I am, Mr. Charteris!’ ejaculated the fair Sophy, from his other side—I know she had shifted her quarters in hopes of extracting some familiarity from him before the lights came back. ‘Close to you—see!’

The order to ‘see’ was apparently accompanied by a playful pinch, for Charteris gave a sudden yell, and a step forward that might have sent him over the precipice.

‘Do be careful, Miss Markham,’ I exclaimed, with an expression of annoyance, ‘and keep your facetiæ until we stand on

safer ground. You might have caused Mr. Charteris to make a false step.'

'Oh, you needn't be so alarmed, Miss Marsh,' she answered meaningly; 'I assure you I am quite as anxious for Mr. Charteris's safety as you can be, and I should think you had quite enough to do to look after Mr. Sandilands without troubling yourself about other people!'

'I don't know what you mean,' I retorted; but at that moment the spirit balloon rose in the air, and half a dozen voices joined in a chorus of admiration at the height and depth and length and breadth of the cavern we stood in, and the glittering clusters of stalactites which the light momentarily revealed as it majestically sailed past them. I looked with the rest, but my thoughts were far away from the scene around me. A question was puzzling my brain which I felt I could not give up until I had

unravelling. *For whom* had Cave Charteris intended the whisper which by mistake he addressed to me?

It worried me all the way home, and long after I had reached it. His subsequent query seemed to imply that he had believed Sophy Markham stood next him, but I could not credit that he had said those words except with the intent to mislead me. Was it possible that he could have seriously called Miss Markham by such a term of endearment, or addressed her with so much earnestness in his voice? And if it were not possible, then—did he intend that speech for Ange, who would have been standing between us had she not slipped round to my other side at the very moment we were left in darkness?

Cave Charteris and Ange! The very combination of names seemed like sacrilege in my ears. The man who had made love

to me, and left me in years gone by—who had tried to make love to me only a few weeks back—to have the happiness of that innocent trusting child in his hands! It was too horrible to think of. Whatever his protestations or passions for the moment might be, he was cold and cruel by nature. I could read it in his eyes and the sentiments in which he expressed his opinions, and I trembled to think what Ange's fate might prove, if he aroused all her deepest feelings, and then basely deserted her as he had deserted me. What was I to do? What was it my duty to do—both towards her and him! If the sentences I heard were meant for Ange, it was not the first time Mr. Charteris had addressed her as a lover. That was evident.

‘My own darling!’ he had said, ‘how much I love you!’

Men don't call women their ‘own’ until

they have proved they are willing to be so. I knew enough of human nature to know that. And then he had added, 'How I long to be alone with you *again*,' which showed that whoever he spoke to had already kept appointments with him.

Oh! could it—could it be our little Ange? All my knowledge of her childish manner, her shyness and her modesty, seemed to refute the suspicion as an impossibility; but it was still more impossible to believe that Mr. Charteris had seriously addressed those lover-like speeches to old Sophy Markham. My mind became distracted in its ignorance what to think, and how to act. If he were making love to Ange, I felt as if, at all risk, I ought to fly to her rescue; but if he were only making fun of Miss Markham's undisguised *penchant* for himself, why my interference would appear very ridiculous, and bring not only discredit on me as a busy-

body and meddler, but perhaps lay me open to a false inference of jealousy.

It was evening—nine or ten o'clock—and I was sitting in my own room, leaning my elbows on the open window-sill, and gazing up into the starless sky. The night was very dark—I remember thinking *how* dark, as I sat and mused there, sadly. I had seen Madame Marmoret, arrayed in her best gown, with her scarlet shawl across her shoulders, her gold earrings dangling from her ears, and the broad strings of her snow-white cap pinned carefully together at the back of her neck, leave the courtyard some time ago, on a visit of ceremony, I presumed, to some of her friends. I knew that Mr. Lovett was busily engaged in the *salle* playing *écarté* with Monsieur Condé, who had looked in to hear if we had enjoyed our visit to his immortal grotto: and I had left Tessie and Ange ironing their father's shirts

in the kitchen. Mr. Charteris I was unable to account for, as he had left the house immediately after dinner, and was probably smoking the calumet of peace with his friend Monsieur de Nesselrode, or perhaps repeating the words which so much troubled me for the benefit of Miss Sophy Markham.

Whose then was the figure, decidedly a man's, which had just entered the courtyard by way of the stables and cow-house, and leant up against the wall outside the kitchen-door? He was smoking a cigar, for I could distinguish the red light as he blew the thin wreaths of smoke into the air; but that was no guide to his personality, since every man in St. Pucelle enjoyed the same privilege. The kitchen window was full in view from where I sat, but the shutters were closed, so I could not see if the girls were still at work within or no. But why did not the stranger, whoever he might be, knock for admittance?

Could he have entered the yard with any nefarious intentions? In another moment I am sure I should have spoken to him, had not the kitchen-door opened suddenly, and a second figure stepped out into the darkness.

‘Don’t stay here!’ said a tender voice, which I recognised at once; ‘I cannot come to you. Tessie wants me in the little *salle*!’

‘Cannot my angel spare me *one* minute?’ asked Cave Charteris.

‘No! not one, until to-morrow! You will not try to keep me now, will you?’—imploringly, as if to say that if he *did* try, he would certainly succeed — ‘because they might hear of it and be angry.’

‘You shall do just as you think best, my darling, on one condition.’

‘What is that?’

‘That you tell me you love me before you go—I cannot sleep without it.’

I could not see, but I fancied, from her

stifled tones, that he had clasped his arms about her.

'Oh! my love! my love!' she repeated fervently; '*I do love you!*'

And then she slipped away and closed the kitchen-door softly, and after an interval of half a minute I heard the other figure step carefully across the paved court and pass into the open street again.

And I turned from the window and sank down on my knees beside my bed, and prayed for a long, long time, for *petite* Ange and for myself, and judgment to know what best to do.



CHAPTER VII.

MASTER FRED.

THE reverie which followed this, to me, astounding revelation resulted in the decision that it was my duty to tell Mr. Lovett what I had overheard. I hardly know, at this period, whether I did right or wrong—whether I should have shown more wisdom in speaking to Tessie or to Ange herself—whether, in fact, any other course of action could have averted the calamity that so quickly followed it. But it can be well understood how difficult a part I had to

play in warning my friends against the man who had wronged me. A thousand times during that night I told myself that I could not do it; that my motives would be misinterpreted, and that if Cave Charteris had failed in his allegiance to me, it was no reason he should be untrue to Angela Lovett. She evidently liked him. No girl of her modesty and virtuous bringing up could have said the words I had heard her say unless she meant them from the bottom of her heart. Yet she was so easily deceived. She was so much too credulous of the goodness of human nature to be fit to judge for herself. Had it been Tessie whom Charteris had selected for his attentions, I should have left them to their own devices. Tessie knew something of the world: her eyes had been opened to a part, at least, of its iniquity; but Ange was a perfect child, both in mind and experience. The complete faith she put in her father's

saintliness was a proof of this, and I felt sure, upon reviewing the discovery I had made, that she would never have kept her relations with Mr. Charteris a secret from those she so much loved and trusted, had he not brought some powerful motive to bear upon her reticence.

What could he have said to persuade this child, who was all frank, ingenuous simplicity, that it was right to hold secret appointments with himself? And why, if his intentions towards her were what they should be, had he not at once avowed them to Mr. Lovett? He was free and independent—at liberty to choose a wife as he listed—and he could have no fear that the poverty-stricken minister would object to see one of his daughters well provided for.

The more I thought of it, the more I felt persuaded that something was wrong. A terrible fear took hold of me that Ange was

in similar danger to that I had passed through—perhaps worse, Heaven only knew. And when daylight dawned I had made up my mind, whatever happened, to inform my reverend guardian of what I had seen and heard.

The task was anything but a pleasant one. As I have already mentioned, since the adventure of the twenty-five francs, I had had little or nothing to say to Mr. Lovett, and I saw that he regarded me with suspicion and dislike. It was for the sake of Ange alone that I conquered my aversion to enter upon any but general topics with him, and small thanks as I expected to receive in return for my moral courage, the event proved that I had over-rated the little interest he had left in me.

Breakfast was over, and the moment had arrived in which to attack him. Ange, who had been looking unusually pale and languid

during the meal, and had scarcely eaten anything, announced her intention of spending the morning with Jeanne Guillot, the mother of the little child that had died of fever, though I wronged the poor girl by believing that she was going to walk with Cave Charteris instead.

‘Why do you let your sister go to those infected cottages?’ I demanded, almost sharply, of Tessie; ‘you had much better keep her at home. She will catch her death there some day, and then you will be sorry.’

Tessie regarded me with mild surprise.

‘Why, Hilda, the fever is not infectious! The doctor says it is purely due to the effects of the long dry summer we have had! And where should Ange be, but amongst those who have suffered from it? The people would not know what had come to St. Pucelle if they missed *petite* Ange from their sides when they were in trouble.’

‘Oh! very well! Do as you choose, but don’t blame me afterwards,’ I responded curtly; for I felt very sore on the subject, and was ready to think Tessie a fool for not being more alive to the moral and physical risks which her sister ran.

They all disappeared after this, and I would not inquire even where they were going. Mr. Lovett and I were left alone in the *salle*, and I might have spoken to him, perhaps, without interruption, but I wished him to attach as much importance as possible to the communication I was about to make.

‘Mr. Lovett,’ I commenced, ‘I have something of the greatest consequence to tell you. When will it be convenient for you to listen to me?’

I suppose he thought I was going to speak again about my money-matters, for I could see the impatient jerk of the shoulders with which he answered :

‘I can anticipate what you are about to say, my dear Hilda ; and can assure you that as soon as your dividends ——’

‘No, no, it is not that!’ I interrupted eagerly. ‘I don’t want money, because Mr. Warrington has sent me some to go on with.’

I am afraid this was a false move. I saw that my guardian took it in anything but good part by the way in which he frowned at me.

So you have applied to Mr. Warrington on the subject.’

‘I did not ask him for any money, if that is what you mean. He sent it me spontaneously. But that has nothing to do with my present business. Can I speak to you alone?’

‘You can say what you wish, although I cannot imagine what else of a private nature you can have to communicate to me.’

‘You will soon find out. But I cannot tell it to you here, with every door and window open.’

‘This is very strange,’ he remarked. ‘Where would you have me go?’

‘Will you come into my bedroom, or may I accompany you in your walk?’

‘The last will be the least remarkable proceeding,’ he replied, as he rose to find his hat and stick.

In a few minutes we were on the high-road together. When it came to the point I found it very difficult to begin; but I had made up my mind that I was right, and was determined to go through with it.

‘Mr. Lovett,’ I said, ‘do you approve of confession?’

‘Well, that is rather a difficult question to answer. I approve of it for the Church of which it forms a law, but not for its own particular merits.’

‘But do you hold with the sacredness of its obligations to secrecy?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Then will you consider that what I am about to tell you is under the seal of confession, and promise me beforehand to keep my communication private?’

‘If it relates to yourself, I will.’

‘I only claim your secrecy on behalf of myself. You have heard that Mr. Charteris and I knew each other many years ago; and perhaps I ought to have told you before now, Mr. Lovett, that in those days he professed to be attached to me.’

‘I don’t see what business that is of mine, my dear Hilda.’

‘Yes, it is your business, because he greatly deceived me, and you have daughters whom he might treat in the same manner. For months my mother and I believed that Cave Charteris intended to marry me; but it

all came to nothing, and for many years his desertion was the source of my bitterest trouble.'

'In that case, I should think the less you say about it the better; and I cannot at all imagine why you should have chosen to make me the confidant of so unpleasant a portion of your history.'

There was so much coldness and selfishness in his words, so little sympathy or interest in his voice, that I looked at him with astonishment. Was this the bland, soft-toned old gentleman whom I had heard talking with such benign pity and charity for all mankind, and who now had apparently not one syllable of compassion or reproach for the heartless marring of a young girl's life? I was so angry with him for the manner in which he had received my communication, that I did not care what I said.

'Then I will tell you, sir,' I went on hotly.

‘The reason I have troubled you with an account of my sufferings at Mr. Charteris’s hands, is because I have every reason to believe that he is carrying on the same game with your daughter Ange.’

Mr. Lovett stopped short in his walk, and, leaning on his stick, turned round and regarded me fully. I can recall the cold light in his blue eyes, and the fixed look of his marble features as he did so, to this day.

‘What proofs have you to advance for the truth of what you say?’ he demanded, in the most frigid tones.

‘I was sitting at my bedroom window last night when they met in the courtyard. I could not help overhearing their conversation, and I am quite convinced that he is persuading Ange to love him. I lay awake all night, thinking what was best for me to do; and I decided that, at all events, you ought to be told of what is going on between them.’

'You lay awake all night, you mean, plotting how you might best destroy an innocent young girl's happiness, in revenge for having missed your own.'

'Oh, Mr. Lovett!' I cried, horrified at the interpretation he had put upon my words. 'How can you think so! I love Ange dearly: I would do anything to secure her happiness; and as for my own, it is very long since it was connected with Cave Charteris. I believe him to be neither good nor true. I do not consider he is capable of making any girl happy; and all I beg of you is to watch over Ange, and to see he does not teach her what is wrong. If he is an honourable suitor, why should he not make known his wishes concerning her to you?'

'I am not prepared to discuss such delicate questions with a young lady, and one who evidently bears no goodwill towards the supposed offender. You seem to have over-

looked one thing, Miss Marsh, in mentioning Mr. Charteris: and that is, that you were speaking of a friend of mine.'

'Is it possible you are going to take his part against your own child!' I exclaimed, in amazement.

'I have yet to be convinced that I *am* taking it against my own child. All the information I have received has come through a woman who, by her own account, has every motive for jealousy, and is an eavesdropper into the bargain.'

'Thank you, Mr. Lovett!' I said grandly. 'I am much obliged to you for your good opinion. I shall not soon forget that I tried to do you a benefit, and you credited me with the worst of feelings in return. I see what I believe to be wrong, and I tell you of it, simply from a sense of duty, and a desire to preserve your daughter from a similar fate to mine. But since you choose to misinterpret

my meaning in so gross a manner, I shall interfere no further in the matter.'

'I beg you will *not*,' he replied sternly. 'I have every faith in the honour of Mr. Charteris and of my daughter, and require no assistance in looking after their interests.'

'You resent my confidence, then, as an insult.'

'I cannot help seeing that it has been actuated by lower motives than you would have me believe. I do not discredit what you have told me ; but I am perfectly content to leave such things to Providence and the good principles in which Ange has been brought up.'

'You wish her, in fact, to marry Cave Charteris ?'

'I know nothing as yet to make me *not* wish it.'

'You do not consider his dishonourable

conduct to myself any drawback to his becoming the lover of Ange ?

‘I should like, before I pronounced any opinion on the subject, to be assured that you did not deceive yourself in the matter. Young women are sometimes apt to make a mistake about gentlemen’s attentions. And even if you are right, by your own showing it happened several years ago, and we may charitably conclude that Mr. Charteris’s character has strengthened and improved during the interval.’

‘I am very sorry I took the trouble to speak to you,’ I said bitterly.

And I was exceedingly sorry. I had meant to do good, and I had done nothing but harm. Mr. Lovett evidently liked the idea of Cave Charteris entangling himself with Ange, and perhaps he had even seen what was going on and encouraged it ; and I stood in the despicable light of an

eavesdropper and scandalmonger, who was actuated by jealousy to play the spy! I could have cried with vexation and indignation, and, indeed, for a while I had not sufficient command over myself to continue the conversation.

‘There is one thing I must request of you, my dear Hilda,’ Mr. Lovett went on mildly: ‘and that is, not to mention this subject to my daughter. It is neither necessary nor delicate—and, in fact, I must forbid it.’

‘You need not be afraid, sir. I shall never interfere with anything concerning either of them again.’

‘That is right. It would vex Tessie beyond measure to hear her sister’s actions discussed in this free manner, and it might ruin Ange’s prospects for life.’


‘I shall leave you to manage them both for the future without any assistance from

me,' I said, turning away, 'but, mark my words, Mr. Lovett, you will live to regret this day.'

As I walked homewards by myself I wondered I had been so bold, but I would not have said one word less had the interview come over again. I read the old man's selfishness at a glance. He was afraid of losing Charteris as a boarder and money-lender if he brought him to book for his actions, and he preferred to risk his innocent little daughter's happiness to giving up a few of his creature-comforts.

How despicable and mean he appeared to me as I reviewed the conversation that had just taken place between us.

I was hurrying home, with my eyes on the ground and my thoughts all engrossed with the subject in hand, when I was attracted by a loud shouting and hallooing, and, looking up, perceived some one in front of me long



and lanky, waving his arms round and round like a windmill.

‘Hollo, Miss Marsh! don’t you know me?’ he exclaimed; and then I recognised my youthful companion of the steamboat, Master Frederick Stephenson.

‘Why, Master Fred, is that really you?’ I said, as I shook hands with him. ‘I believe you have grown, even in the short time since I saw you. And does your cousin expect you? He said nothing to us about it.’

‘Expect me! Not he, the scrubby fellow! He promised a dozen times that he’d ask me over here for a day’s shooting, and I’ve written almost every week to remind him, but ’twas no go. So I got old Felton to give me a holiday, and took French leave; and here I am, and if Cave don’t like it, he can do the other thing, for I don’t mean to go back till my time’s up.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘Last train this evening ; but I say, by Jove! Miss Marsh, how jolly you look! You’re twice as fat as you were when we crossed over together, and you’ve got such a colour. You’re first rate, you are.’

‘Am I?’ I said, hardly able to help laughing at the rough compliment, though I felt so sad. ‘I am glad you think so, Fred, for I would much rather look nice to my friends than nasty.’

‘Well, you do look nice, then, and no mistake. And are both the Miss Lovetts at home?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m in luck, by George! won’t that beggar Charteris be surprised to see me walk in! I’d a mind to show him I was not going to be humbugged in that way. He thought he’d keep all the fun to himself, I suppose.’

‘I am afraid you have not come on a shoot-

ing-day, at least I heard nothing about it this morning.'

'I don't mind. I'd rather stay with you. Is that the house? It is pretty! Just like an old Swiss chalet. And, by the way, Miss Marsh, how do you get on with old Lovett?' concluded the young gentleman, with a peculiar twinkle in his eye.

'Oh! very well. How should I get on with him?'

'Isn't he a good, pious, benevolent, amiable old gentleman, eh? Isn't he self-denying, and prudent, and saving, and all that sort of thing?'

'Hold your tongue, sir,' I replied, 'and don't speak in that way of your betters.'

For all the windows and doors were open, and I had no wish that Tessie or Ange should overhear the remarks of my impudent young friend.

'My *betters!*' reiterated Master Fred.

‘Oh! come now, Miss Marsh, do draw it mild.’

‘I hope you are not going to indulge us with that sort of schoolboy slang all dinner-time, or you will shock the Miss Lovetts,’ I told him, ‘and, if I am not much mistaken, you will offend your cousin also.’

‘Ah! the elegant and accomplished Cave. Yes, I shouldn’t wonder if I did, and it would not be the first time either. But I see his cropped flaxen poll bobbing up at the window. By Jove! didn’t he look black when he caught sight of me! I’m in for it, Miss Marsh, and no mistake; but I rather like a row than otherwise. There’s so little excitement about here, that one’s digestion is ruined for want of it.’

‘Oh! I hope you won’t have a row,’ I replied; but when we entered the *salle*, where Mr. Charteris was seated with the two girls, I was really afraid Master Fred’s prophecy

would come true. I could not account for the extreme annoyance that clouded his cousin's face at the sight of him. It could not have arisen simply from the fact of the boy having made his appearance without leave, and yet one would have thought he had committed the most serious offence by doing so.

'Well, Cave, you don't look over and above pleased to see me!' exclaimed the lad, as soon as he had renewed his acquaintance with the Lovett girls.

'I can't say I am. Why didn't you wait till I sent for you, instead of running over in this unceremonious fashion?'

'Wait till you sent for me! I fancy I might have waited till the crack of doom, in that case. Why, how much longer do you intend to remain here yourself?'

'I don't know, and it's no concern of yours,' replied Charteris, with visible annoyance.

‘Of course not! You’re your own master, and the longer you stay away the better, at least for those at home.’

‘Now, Fred, I don’t want any of your nonsense. Please to understand that.’

‘I can’t give you sense if I haven’t got it. But my dad writes me word that they’ve a clean bill of health down at Parkhurst now, and that Mary is very anxious to see you back again.’

If Charteris had been suddenly shot he could hardly have jumped up more quickly than he did at these words.

‘Fred, my boy!’ he exclaimed, with a total change of manner, ‘don’t you want to have a little shooting in the forest?’

‘Well, of course I do, if it’s possible! But I didn’t expect to get it, as I came over without warning.’

‘I should like to oblige you if I can, but if we are to do anything we must start at once.’

I left my guns up at the château, and we must call for them on our way. Are you game for a long walk, Fred ?

‘ Pretty well ! but is there any such hurry ? Can’t we get an hour or two after *gottter* ? I’m no great shakes with a gun, you know, Cave—not a bigwig like you or the Baron—so that I dare say I shall have had enough of it long before you have. And I’m so hungry.’

‘ Bother your hunger ! we can get something up at the château. If you want to shoot, say so ; and if you don’t, you’d better go back to Rille, for there’s no other amusement for you at St. Pucelle.’

I could not imagine why he should be so cross with the lad, and Tessie and Ange seemed as puzzled as myself. Fred Stephenson was nothing but a boy—troublesome, no doubt, and often saucy, as boys will be—but frank, gentlemanly young fellow that no

man need have been ashamed to own as a relation. As Mr. Charteris spoke to him in the rough way related, he stood silent for a moment, and then said with a kind of nervous laugh :

‘ There’s evidently no room for me here, so perhaps I should be wiser to go back.’

‘ No, no !’ I urged ; ‘ stay and shoot. Mr. Charteris only wants you to make up your mind.’

‘ If he’s got one !’ sneered his cousin.

‘ Blowed if I haven’t got as big a one as you !’ exclaimed the lad ; ‘ and a better temper into the bargain. I’m sure I pity your people at home——’

But before he could finish his sentence Charteris had turned on him with a face pale with passion.

‘ Are you going to hold your tongue or not ?’ he said.

‘ I see no reason why I should.’

'Then I shall have to make you.'

'You'd better try!'

Their conversation was so inevitably leading to a quarrel that I thought it time to interfere. I had no clue to the mystery that had raised Mr. Charteris's temper, but I was sorry for Fred Stephenson, whom I could see was feeling all a boy's disappointment at the prospect of having his holiday cut short. So I attempted the *rôle* of peacemaker.

'Mr. Charteris, pray don't have any words with your cousin. You are frightening Ange and all of us. And, Fred, you shouldn't speak in that way; you are spoiling your holiday, and making everybody uncomfortable. Mr. Charteris, won't you take him to the forest?'

'If he wishes it I will. I have already said so.'

'I am sure he wishes it. He only came over for that purpose; didn't you, Fred?'

'I shan't care to go if Charteris speaks to me in that manner,' grumbled the boy.

'I shall not do it if you keep a civil tongue in your head. Will you come out shooting, then, or not?'

'Yes.'

'Very well; I shall be ready in half a minute.'

Charteris turned on his heel as he spoke and left the room, but I detected an uncomfortable look of suspicion on his face as he did so.

This unpleasant episode had made us all feel conscious, and not tended to increase the hilarity of my temperament. Fred stood thoughtfully at the window after his cousin had disappeared, and I drew near to speak a few words of comfort to him.

'I am sorry this has happened, but it will all blow over in the forest. I suppose you will come back to dinner with him.'

‘I don’t know. If I don’t get on his black books again, I may. What makes him so grumpy, Miss Marsh?’

‘I have no idea! He seemed annoyed at your mentioning Parkhurst. Is that where his family live?’

‘Yes! And you know it’s such a shame, he’s been away from home now for nearly six months, and of course it’s put them out, and my dad says it’s all a pretence his being afraid of the scarlet fever. Only two had it, and they were well weeks ago, and poor Mary——’

‘That’s his sister, isn’t it?’ I interposed.

But Cave Charteris re-entered the room at that very moment, and Fred did not answer my question. I was sorry for it, for I wanted to learn something about his cousin’s family, for Ange’s sake. But he was hurried off to the château, and there was no further opportunity to exchange a word with him. He

departed with many *au revoirs*, promising himself to meet us again at dinner ; but when that meal was served, to our great surprise Mr. Charteris walked in alone.

‘Where is your cousin?’ we simultaneously asked him.

‘My cousin!’ he ejaculated, as if he had quite forgotten his existence. ‘What! Fred Stephenson! I’ve sent him back to school by the diligence.’

‘Without his dinner?’ said Tessie, in a voice of pity.

‘Oh! he had an excellent lunch at the Baron’s—ate enough for two, I can assure you; and I knew if I brought him back here that he would outstay his leave. Mr. Felton is very particular about the boys being punctual, and Master Fred is *not* particular about anything at all; and so, as I am a sort of guardian of his, responsible to his father for his good behaviour and all that sort of

thing, I thought it better to take the law into my own hands and see him safely off before I sat down to dinner.'

It sounded plausible. There was no particular fault to find with the man's anxiety to save his young cousin from getting into a scrape with his master, still, coupling it with the reception he had given the lad that morning, and the haste with which he had hurried him out of the house, I could not help suspecting that Cave Charteris had some other reason beside what he stated for trying to keep Master Fred Stephenson out of the way.



CHAPTER VIII.

ACCEPTED.

‘WHY do you go up to the convent every morning, dear? It is far too long a walk for you.’

I was standing in the little *salle*, holding Ange’s hot hand in my own. Six days had elapsed since Master Fred Stephenson had appeared and so mysteriously disappeared from amongst us, and on each one of them Ange had toiled up to the Couvent des Petites Sœurs, which was situated on the brow of a hill, two miles on the road to Artois, and not

come back again until it was time for dinner.

I believed that in her feverish and unsettled state of mind, and with her loose notions of theology, she was doing some sort of penance to satisfy her self-accusing conscience, and I so much wished that the dear child would open her mind to Tessie and me instead, and let us give her all the sisterly counsel in our power. But each day she seemed to shrink more and more from us, as well she might, whilst that man was persuading her to stain her fair soul with the blot of deceit.

But there were other reasons for my trying to dissuade Ange from going to the convent. She was very far from well, or fit for the exertion. Whether it proceeded from mind or body, I could not tell, but since the day she had overheard Madame Marmoret's speech to her father, in the courtyard, she

had been quite unlike her former joyous, light-hearted self. Her cheeks were always either unnaturally flushed or unnaturally pale, she complained of a dull headache, and all the bounding elasticity I had so much admired seemed to have deserted her limbs. She was very particular about her religious services at this time, poor dear little Ange, spending an hour almost every evening in the church of St. Marie, and poring over her Bible long after Tessie and I had gone to rest.

Still, neither religion nor exercise and fresh air made any palpable difference in the appearance of the little maid, and I felt sure that something was very wrong. My expostulations on the subject with Tessie only brought to light another instance of Mr. Lovett's selfishness. She looked very grave over the details of her sister's symptoms, but was afraid to mention them to her father, because it would seem as though Ange re-

quired a doctor, and there was none nearer than Rille.

He visited St. Pucelle once a week, and when he next came she would ask him to prescribe for Ange; but to send for him especially to visit her was to entail an expense which she was sure 'dear papa' could not afford. The time was past for disguising my sentiments in Tessie's presence, and I told her plainly what I thought on this occasion.

Yet she was too timid to move in the matter. 'Dear papa' had evidently inspired her with so much wholesome dread of provoking his annoyance, that she preferred to shut her eyes to the fact of there being any danger in delay. But all this time I am standing in the inner *salle* with that little hot feverish hand in mine.

'Why must you go to the convent, Ange?'

‘There is no particular necessity, Hilda,’ she answered, yet she would not meet my eyes as she did so, ‘but it is a pleasure to me, and I feel as if I could not breathe in the house this weather. I know all the sisters well, and their parlours are so cool and pleasant. I feel like another creature inside the convent walls.’

‘I hope you are not thinking of joining their community, Ange?’

‘Oh no—oh no!’—with a vivid blush; ‘I am not good enough.’

‘I don’t know about that, but we certainly can’t afford to lose you! However, if you are bent upon going this morning, may I go with you?’

A startled look came into her eyes.

‘Into the convent, do you mean?’

‘No! not so far as that! Only to walk to the gates with you.’

‘Oh! do, Hilda! I shall be very glad of

your company. It is a lonely path over the hill.'

So I was mistaken, after all, and wronged the little maid in thinking that Charteris must be her cavalier on these occasions.

We walked together through the blazing light over the fern-covered hill, and conversed pleasantly on all the topics that interest young women most. Once I tried to sound her on the subject of Charteris, but she shrunk from it so visibly that I had not the heart to try again. It was as if I had plunged a surgeon's probe into a bleeding wound.

When I had kissed her pretty face for the last time, and left her behind the great iron grille of the convent, I could not help believing that my former supposition was correct, and Ange was brooding over the prospect of shutting herself up for ever

within its walls. This idea worried me sadly. It would be like a living death for her!

And what else but the burden of a committed wrong could have made Ange's thoughts turn that way? Could she have discovered more of her father's pecuniary affairs than Tessie and I knew of? and did the knowledge of disgrace and debt weigh her mind down to that extent that she longed to bury herself from the sight of the world? Or did the poor child imagine that the burthen of one less to keep and provide for would be of any substantial benefit to the family purse?

These questions occupied my mind for half the way back again—until I came, indeed, upon a figure in a velveteen shooting-suit, stretched out at full length upon the thyme-scented grass, and lazily inhaling the light breeze that was wafted across the stream in

the valley, and just lifted occasionally a curl of dark hair from his brow.

It was that of my French master, Armand, Baron de Nesselrode.

I feel I have reached a point when I must make a confession—namely, that since the memorable day upon which I was frightened by the dog-wolf on the Piron road, I had received more than one French lesson from the gentleman in question. I had never made a single appointment with him for the purpose; but he seemed to be ubiquitous, and to pop up wherever I went, so that although the verbs I mastered with him were *accidentals*, I had acquired quite a remarkable fluency in conversation, and never felt at a loss to express what I meant.

He said I learned quicker than anybody he had known before; but I suppose, if 'practice makes perfect,' there was not so much credit due to me as he would have

made me believe. Once I remember I stopped to ask myself if I were studying the French language so diligently *for Tessie's sake*, and I was fain to answer 'No.'

Indeed, I am afraid that by this time Tessie's interests had been withdrawn from the firm altogether. She was very stupid so I inwardly decided ; she would not come forward and make the best of herself in the Baron's presence, and in consequence it was impossible he could discover what a good wife he would gain in her, and so I had given them both up as a bad job.

If people *wouldn't* find out what was best for themselves, it was useless wasting my time upon them. So Tessie's merits had ceased to be dragged in by the head and shoulders, as a topic of conversation between Armand and me, and we only talked of such things as were most agreeable to ourselves.

'Well, monsieur,' I exclaimed, as I came

up with him, 'and what may you be doing here?'

'I followed you, mademoiselle.'

'That is a pretty confession! How could you tell I had come this way?'

'I saw Mademoiselle Ange and you leave the curé's house together.'

'And so you have been dogging our footsteps,' I said, as I threw myself down on the grass he had just quitted.

The Baron accepted my action as an invitation to resume his seat.

'It is about time you accounted for yourself,' I continued jestingly. 'I don't think we have seen you for two whole days.'

'Is it only two days?' he said, in a melancholy voice. 'It seems like two weeks to me.'

'Why, monsieur, what is the matter with you? Not moping again, I hope! I thought you promised me to be brave and

keep your heart up, in hope of better times.'

He sighed deeply.

'That was a week ago,' he answered.

'And what of that? You are talking mysteries to me.'

'Mademoiselle,' said the Baron, suddenly changing the topic, 'do you remember telling me the day we talked together on the road to Piron, that there is no "stooping" in honest labour?'

'I do.'

'I have thought much and earnestly of your words since then. I look back on the years that have passed since my great misfortune, and I see they have all been spent in idleness and waste of mind and body! I cannot recall them: they are gone and done for: they must be left to give their own account hereafter. But for the few that remain before I hope to take my station in

society again I am determined, if possible, not to blush. I have made up my mind, mademoiselle. I am going to work.'

'I am sincerely glad to hear you say so!' I exclaimed.

'If you are glad, it is all I ask. I will try to be glad also.'

'But what are you going to do?'

'I wrote to a friend at Court some weeks ago, telling him all, and asking his assistance to procure me fit employment until I should hold my own again. His answer arrived three days back. In it he offers me the post of *Ministre d'affaires* in—in—Algiers.'

'*Algiers!*'

As I repeated the word after him, all the broad smiling landscape of hill and dale and stream which lay spread out before me seemed to be enveloped in a black mist that hid it from my view. A hoarse sound like the rushing of water was in my ears, and a horrid

‘whirring’ like wheels in my brain ; then it all cleared off again. The sun broke out over the valley, my senses had returned ; but I thought that the earth would never look the same to me again.

‘Do you not congratulate me?’ inquired Monsieur de Nesselrode, quietly. ‘It is a charming climate, I understand, and the place is peopled with French. The salary is almost nominal, so are the duties ; but the position is one that I can accept without blushing, and I shall, at all events, have an arena for work amongst my countrymen, small as it may be.’

‘Yes.’

‘Does not the appointment meet your views for me ? Will it not be better than dragging out four more years of idleness and false shame at the Château des Roses ?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘I am not capable of much at present, you

know, whatever I may be hereafter. You—
in the goodness of your heart and friendship
—may think me fit for a higher post, but I
feel I am not. I have crippled my powers
by nonusage : I must crawl now before I can
fly. Perhaps, after a year or two, I may be
fit for something better than the ministration
of affairs in such a place as Algiers.'

'I am sure you will.'

I was so angry with myself for not being
able to say something better to him than this.

I saw he wanted encouragement to take up
this paltry appointment in a strange country.
He had applied for it solely on my recom-
mendation, and now that it had come, I had
no words in which to praise and thank him
for the compliment he had paid to my ad-
vice.

But Algiers—a place so far removed from
all his friends, and replete, as I ignorantly
imagined, with dangers from climate and

people—I did not expect that my counsel would have taken so unwelcome a form.

‘You do not congratulate me, mademoiselle,’ he repeated presently. ‘Do you not consider the prospect a good one?’

‘Oh yes,’ I answered nervously; ‘very good indeed—that is, it is rather far from here, is it not, monsieur?’

‘It is very far,’ he said gravely. ‘I do not suppose, when I have once left it, that I shall ever see St. Pucelle again; for the remembrances of the old château have no charm for me. A few weeks back, I would have declared myself ready to bear anything sooner than go to Algiers; but things that have come to my knowledge lately have made me think that the greater distance I put between myself and this place the better.’

‘Have you any fresh trouble?’ I inquired anxiously, for he was my best friend in St.

Pucelle, and I had come to be interested in all that befell him.

‘Yes, a very deep trouble!’

‘What is it, monsieur? Will you not tell me?’

He turned round upon his side, so that his face could look directly into mine.

‘If I tell you, will you promise not to be angry with me, nor to feel less my friend than you do now?’

‘I promise!’

But there was an expression in his eyes that made me drop my own, I could not look at him.

‘Remember, before I speak, how much I wish you well. Hilde!’ (he had never called me by that name before), ‘if I could give you happiness by cutting off my right arm, I would do it at this moment. So that I am really and honestly glad to know that you are glad. The pain only is mine, *amie chérie*;

and I can bear that bravely, so long as all is well with you.'

'Monsieur, I do not understand what you mean!'

'When this appointment was first offered me, I thought I could not take it. I thought it would be impossible to leave St. Pucelle and you. But only a few hours afterwards I met Mademoiselle Markham, and she told me all about your *affaire de cœur*, and I was happy it should be so ; only I felt I could not stay and see it.'

'What did she tell you?' I asked quickly.

'That you are *fiancée* to Monsieur Sandilands. Ah, you need not blush, Hilde! It is all right if you wish it so. But for me it is better I should go to Algiers, and forget the pleasant times that we have spent together.'

'Armand!' I said vehemently, 'it is a

lie! I am not *fiancée* to Mr. Sandilands, nor to anybody.'

How his face changed from quiet melancholy to radiant hope. The dullest eye might have interpreted that look.

'What!' he exclaimed. 'You are free!'

'I *am* free.'

'And you are sorry I am going to Algiers?'

'I *am* sorry!'

I do not know if there ever lived any women in this world (such as some novelists depict for us) who could cast away the whole of their lives' happiness for want of a single word to clear up a misunderstanding—but if so, I am not one of them. Armand de Nesselrode looked me full in the face as he put that question, and I should have been ashamed of myself, if I had not answered him truthfully.

‘Hilde!’ he said passionately, ‘will you go with me?’

Then I felt that my woman’s victory was won, and I could afford to be silent and let silence speak for me.

‘I should not have dared to ask for this,’ he went on rapidly, ‘had it not been for the sweet encouragement your words have given me. You have told me that you despise wealth in comparison with love; that you rank a true heart and a strong arm above any earthly advantage, and that you think my honour still unstained. Will you take me, then, beloved Hilde, a poor man, disgraced in the eyes of the world, and with nothing to offer the woman he would make his wife, except a true affection and an earnest desire to prove himself worthy of hers? Oh, Hilde! do not keep me in suspense. I have loved you ever since the day you prayed for me in St. Marie?’

I raised my eyes and looked at the dear face lifted so pleadingly to my own, and felt that nothing on this earth could repay me for the loss I should sustain in losing him.

‘Armand,’ I said tremblingly, ‘I must go with you to Algiers—because I don’t pronounce French half as well yet as you would wish to hear me do it, you know!’

And then I put my head down in my hands and burst into tears, from sheer excess of happiness.

I shall not write down here how he soothed me. Were I not my own biographer I might be able to tell it, but from the moment Armand said he loved me, our affection has been too sacred a thing for me to make public. In half an hour we were still sitting on that grass, chatting away as if we had been engaged for years, and making all sorts of plans for the future.

I confided to him my money matters and Mr. Lovett's strange dealings with me regarding them, and he told me how much his card transactions with the reverend gentleman had got him into debt, and how he proposed to liquidate it so that we might start free when we were married.

And we mutually agreed not to say a word of what had passed between us that morning, until after Mr. Warrington's visit had been paid to St. Pucelle, and my affairs with my guardian set straight again.

Oh, how charming it was sitting in that lovely sunlight, and talking of the happy days to come! Algiers no longer seemed a horrid desert, situated a thousand leagues away from St. Pucelle. Our love had drawn it closer, and peopled it with pleasant forms and faces, until it looked like fairyland! I had but one regret amidst my pleasure: that my dear mother had not lived to see

it! Bear witness for me, best beloved of parents, that you were not forgotten in your lonely grave in Norwood at that most ecstatic moment of my existence, for the tears ran down my cheeks as I recalled your love for me, and I told Armand what he had lost in never knowing it.'

'I will be thy mother and thy father and thy everything to thee, *chérie*,' he answered, with the sweet *tu-toy* that sounded like music in my ears; 'only let me wipe away those tears, and see my Baronne smile again!'

It was difficult to remain subject to any melancholy long, whilst under the influence of Armand's new-born happiness. His face positively beamed with joy. I had never caught even a glimpse of such an expression on his countenance before.

'I let thee go, my Hilde!' he said, when I had persuaded him that after four hours'

absence from the house I ran the risk of being questioned as to how I had spent my time, 'but I shall count the moments till we meet again.'

'But thou wilt never feel lonely now, Armand,' I replied. 'Thou wilt look forward to the future we shall spend hand-in-hand.'

'I shall look forward to the time, my friend, when the angel who watches over me shall fold her wings upon my heart,' he answered.

It is very nice to be called an angel! I almost believed I was one by the time we got back to the house. But we had to walk with the utmost propriety through the town—at least three feet apart—and to bow to each other most politely as we parted at the door.

'Art thou sure thou art not *fiancée* to Monsieur Sandilands?' whispered Armand,

as he doffed his hat to me, and the look of perfect happiness upon his face as he said so, gave me the strangest joy my life had ever known.



CHAPTER IX.

THE DEATH-BLOW.

I HAD been hugging this dear delicious secret to my breast for the last three days ; going apart at intervals to gaze upon it and assure myself that it was mine ; and quite unable to believe in so much joy after the hopeless desolation of the last few months when that happened, which any one with discernment must have foreseen long ago, *petite* Ange succumbed to the illness which had been hanging over her for weeks past.

It was one morning when she had left the

room as usual, *en route* to her convent, and Mr. Lovett had set off on a round of what he called his parochial duties, that Tessie and I were startled by the sound of a loud clamour and confusion arising from the courtyard.

‘Good gracious!’ I exclaimed, as it struck my ears; ‘what on earth is that?’

Tessie, who had turned as white as a sheet, would have detained me in the little *salle*, but I broke from her grasp, and rushing into the kitchen, looked through the open window. There I saw assembled in the court a group of about a dozen men and women, amongst whom I immediately distinguished the figures of Madame Marmoret, the Mère Fromard, and Jean Marat, who were all surrounding my reverend guardian and preventing his egress from his own domains. They had evidently waited to waylay him on his leaving the house, and

were screeching or howling, according to their various sexes, as they made their fierce demands upon him for justice.

Mutiny was strongly marked on every countenance, and they pressed upon the old man as though they would lay violent hands upon him. Of course I guessed the reason of the uproar. It was the old story; they wanted their money, and he had none to give them! I glanced from the crowd towards my guardian, and for the first time I pitied him. He looked so pale and crestfallen as he leaned against the courtyard wall, fencing off his creditors with the stick on which he supported himself. It was a sickening and humiliating spectacle, and I thanked Heaven in that moment that no blood of his ran in my veins.

‘Where are the twelve francs you owe me, monsieur?’ shouted Marat the cobbler. ‘I tell you I must have them. My wife is ill in

bed, and requires broth and white bread to get up her strength again. Do you think I am going to let her want for lack of that which is my own? Hand them out, I say, for I will have them.'

'Bah!' cried the scornful voice of Mère Fromard. 'What is thy wife's illness to him? Didn't he steal my poor Guillaume's money, and the little *dot* I brought him on our marriage day? Five hundred and fifty francs, messieurs—every *sou* owed us by that black-hearted old villain! and he let my husband die for want of bread and meat. I wish I could tear him in pieces, and would be too good an end for him. *Sacré!*'

'And much good you'd get out of his carcase, Mère Fromard!' interposed Madame Marmoret; 'better wait, I tell you, till it's all over, and then the law must give us our rights!'

'Madame! Madame!' said her master, in a

mildly reproachful voice, 'is it you that can say no better of me than that! You, who have lived under my roof and eaten my bread for more than twenty years!'

'Lived under your roof — pig! Aye! that I have, and done you good service for it too! Haven't I baked and boiled and mended and cleaned for you and yours for twenty-two years last Candlemass! And what wages have I received in return? None! Not a *sou*—not a *centime*! I have gone on and on, because I knew if I left you I should get nothing, and you have promised and promised till I'm sick of the sound of your voice or the sight of your face. I should have summoned you before the *préfet* and had my rights years ago if it hadn't been for *la petite Ange*, and you know it—*vaurien* as you are—and have held the child as a threat over my head in consequence.'

'Down with him!' shouted half a dozen voices; 'down with the man who uses his own child as an instrument wherewith to scourge the poor, whom she is so good to! Don't show him any pity! He has never shown any for our wives or children!'

They pressed so closely upon him, and their faces were so distorted by passion, that I became horribly alarmed for his safety. Had Mr. Charteris been in the house, I should have summoned him at once to my assistance, but he had gone out shooting with Armand, and was miles and miles away. Mr. Lovett's face was as pale and set as marble, but he continued in the same position and evinced no outward signs of fear.

'Cannot you speak a little lower, my friends?' he expostulated, in a firm voice. 'I suppose you do not wish the whole town to hear your complaints?'

‘What do we care who hears us?’ replied the man in the blouse and the peaked cap, whose name was Dubois; ‘all St. Pucelle knows you to be a robber! The wider the truth is spread the better!’

‘I know I owe you all some money,’ said Mr. Lovett, ‘and when I can pay you, I will. At present it is impossible, and you will get no good by keeping me a prisoner in my own yard. You had much better disperse quietly, and leave me in peace to see what arrangements I can make to satisfy you.’

‘Aye—aye!’ responded Dubois, ‘leave you to go out and order in more champagne and burgundy, and truffled turkeys and smoked hams, for your own table, whilst we go home to feast on rye-bread and water. That’s what you’ve been doing for the last twenty years. Eating your head off on honest people’s credit, and giving them

battered words instead of cash. But you've come to the end of your tether at last.'

'*Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!*' yelled the rest, as they brandished their bare arms and made grimaces at him.

'Truffled turkeys and champagne!' screamed the Mère Fromard; 'I'll give him a truffled turkey to remember me by!' and, seizing a huge wooden *sabot* from her foot, she prepared to hurl it at his head.

In a moment I had dashed through the kitchen-door, and was standing in front of the old man. My sudden and unexpected appearance created somewhat of a diversion.

'How dare you attempt violence!' I cried excitedly; 'put down that *sabot*, Mère Fromard, or I will send at once for the *gendarme*. You are fools, every one of you, to risk a prison for the sake of indulging your venomous tongues.'

'Mamselle does not understand,' com-

menced the cobbler, with a view to explanation.

‘I understand everything, Jean Marat, and I see that you are a set of cowardly ruffians instead of respectable tradespeople as I took you to be. Twelve to one! That is a brave proceeding, isn't it? Why, if you hadn't watched Monsieur Charteris out of the house, you wouldn't have dared to enter the yard.’

‘We want our money, mamselle,’ squeaked a woman's voice.

‘Well, you shan't have it! not until you have apologised to Monsieur le Curé for the indignities you have put upon him, and gone quietly away to your own homes. If you will do that, I promise you your bills shall be paid.’

‘Aye! but have you any right to promise?’ grumbled one of the men.

‘I have money of my own, and I will pay them myself. Will that satisfy you?’

‘You may trust the word of mamselle,’ said Madame Fromard, addressing the crowd. ‘I know a true face when I see it, and she has been very good to me since Guillaume died.’

‘And nicely you have requited my kindness, Madame Fromard,’ I retorted. ‘You, who call yourself a Christian, to attempt to injure an old man like this, and a minister of religion. Are you not afraid of bringing down the anger of Heaven upon your family? What would Monsieur l’Abbé say to such a disgraceful proceeding?’

‘Monsieur l’Abbé owes no man anything,’ grumbled the woman.

‘And because he is good, is that any reason you should be bad? I’m ashamed of the whole lot of you. Come now! clear out of this courtyard at once. If there is a single man or woman left here in two minutes’ time, I shall send for the *gendarme* to restore

order. And you, Marmoret, go back to your kitchen and remain there !

I suppose my determined voice and manner had some effect in making them obey me, for they certainly disappeared with marvellous alacrity. But I was terribly frightened the while, and when the last one had filed out of the yard, I was trembling all over from excitement.

‘Mr. Lovett,’ I said quickly, as I turned to my guardian ; ‘pray come back into the house. I am sure you must want a glass of wine after such an unpleasant scene.’

The old man looked just the same as he had done before : very pale and fixed, but unmoved ; and I could not help admiring his British determination not to show the white feather. Yet, when he answered me, I saw that his lip trembled, and I could hardly understand what he said.

‘Thank you, my dear Hilda,’ were his

first words; and then I think he added, in a lower tone, 'I have not deserved this at your hands.'

We passed through the kitchen arm-in-arm, and I threw a defiant glance at Madame Marmoret, in exchange for the scowl with which she honoured me, and led my guardian to the little *salle*, where Tessie, who had nearly frightened herself into a fit, was waiting to receive us.

'Oh, papa! dear papa!' she exclaimed, as she flung herself into her father's arms and burst into tears. 'What *shall* we do? Are those horrid people gone? Is there nothing we can say to keep them quiet?'

But Mr. Lovett had quite recovered himself by this time, and was ready to rebuke his daughter for her folly in making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

'Calm yourself, my dear Tessie,' he said, as he patted her on the back; 'there is

nothing to be so agitated about. These poor souls are certainly very ignorant of etiquette, and we must make allowances for them, although they must be taught that they cannot take the law in their own hands. They appear to have a little misunderstanding amongst them, and to fancy I do not intend to pay them their money. I must set this straight at once, and for that purpose I think it will be better if I go to Rille for a few days and consult my man of business, Monsieur Richet. Let me see, to-day is Tuesday, and I shall be back, at the latest, on Friday. Will you put a couple of shirts into my small black bag, my dear, and anything else you may think necessary, whilst our dear Hilda pours me out a glass of burgundy, for I really require something after all that talking.'

I had not been his 'dear Hilda' for many a long day, but I was in no frame of mind to

resent the liberty then. My reverend guardian's coolness took me completely aback. Did he think that Tessie and I were to be gulled by his proposals to see his man of business, or had he talked in that pompous manner so long that he had outgrown the perception of its absurdity? At any rate, however, I was thankful he was going to Rille. To get him out of the way for the present was the chief thing, and whilst there, we might come to some conclusion as to the best way to patch up his affairs, which were so evident a scandal in the parish.

'Let us walk with your father to the diligence, Tessie,' I suggested, as she reappeared with his travelling-bag, for I felt quite afraid lest something might happen in the middle of the town if he were allowed to go by himself.

Every one was agreeable to this arrangement, so we accompanied him as far as the

Hôtel d'Etoile, and saw him safely seated in the coach and started on the road to Artois. And then we returned home again, I exhorting Tessie all the way to try and control her feelings, and keep her own counsel with respect to the morning's alarm, lest some report of it should reach the ears of Ange.

When we arrived at the house we ran upstairs together to make the beds, a domestic duty which we had taken upon ourselves and should have accomplished directly after breakfast had it not been for the unfortunate interruption to which we had been subjected. The first room we entered was that occupied by Ange and Tessie. The first thing I saw on entering it was a black heap upon the floor.

'Hullo!' I exclaimed, thinking it was a fallen dress, and about to reprimand the Miss Lovetts for their untidiness; but the next moment my voice had changed to a shrill

alarm. 'Tessie, Tessie! look here—for God's sake! *it is Ange!*'

We rushed up to the figure on the floor and knelt beside it. I raised the head and laid it gently back upon my arm. The girl was in a state of complete unconsciousness.

'She has fainted!' cried Tessie. 'Oh, my poor darling, how ill she looks! And how did she come here? I thought she had gone to the convent.'

'So did I! She certainly said good-bye to us as she left the *salle*. Can she have felt ill and returned whilst we were absent?'

'But then Marmoret would have seen her, Hilda. The door of the corridor is locked; I have the key in my pocket.'

'Well, we mustn't stay to speculate how it happened. Put a pillow under her head, Tessie. We must lay her flat down on the ground and loosen her clothes. Oh! how I

wish you had sent for Dr. Perrin when I asked you.'

'How could I tell she was so ill?' asked Tessie, weeping.

'Any one could have told it! She has been ill and feverish for weeks past, and I am not sure if her mind or body are suffering the most. What a pity we didn't find her before your father left the house. He might have sent Monsieur Perrin back from Rille at once.'

'We must write and tell him by this afternoon's post, Hilda. Oh! why doesn't she open her eyes? What shall we do?'

'Set the door and window wide open, and run down and fetch some spring water to sprinkle her face with. Don't cry so, Tessie; it can do no good, and will distress her when she is coming to herself again.'

Tessie flew downstairs to do my bidding, and returned in company with Madame Mar-

moret, to whom she had confided her sister's condition. To see that woman as she bent over the insensible form of her nursling, with all the rancour faded out of her black eyes, and her hard-lined, brown face twitching with emotion, one would never have believed she was the same creature who had urged on her master's creditors to take their vengeance with the malignity of a she-devil.

'*Eh! bah! ma petite Ange!*' she exclaimed, in a tone of anguish, as she kissed the unconscious face. 'What art thou dreaming of? It is not time to go to heaven yet, *bébé*, though thou art fitter for that than for such an earth as ours. What can have brought thee to such a state, *enfant chérie*? *Ay mi, ay mi!*'

'It is my belief you have only yourself to thank for it, Madame,' I said curtly, as I unceremoniously thrust her to one side.

‘Does mamselle wish to insult me?’ she demanded.

‘I wish to tell you the truth. I believe that Mademoiselle Ange never went to the convent at all this morning, but came up to her room instead, and then overheard the disgraceful tumult you permitted in the courtyard. You may fancy how that would affect her when she has been kept in ignorance even of her father’s debts.’

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ cried Madame, aghast. ‘You do not mean to tell me the child was *here* the while?’

‘I feel sure she was. She could not have left the house and returned to it without our notice. We forgot all about her in our excitement, while she stood here and received a sword in her tender little heart. Poor Ange!’

‘Oh, my *bébé*, my *bébé!*’ said Madame, with the tears running down her cheeks; ‘it

is not true—it cannot be true! For nineteen years have I borne it patiently for her sake, and would have bitten my tongue out sooner than have told her what I suffered. And now, through my own wickedness, in an evil moment, she has heard all!

‘Hush!’ I exclaimed authoritatively. ‘She is coming to herself. Don’t make her worse by the sight of your agitation.’

As I spoke the words, Ange slowly unclosed her violet eyes—dimmed violets they looked now, as if a cloudy mist had spread over them—and turned them inquiringly upon me.

‘It is all right, darling,’ I said cheerfully, to reassure her. ‘You have been a stupid girl and fainted, but now that you have revived again, we will lift you on the bed, and let you lie still and rest.’

We all three raised her as I concluded, and helped to lay her on her bed, but the only

sign of consciousness she gave was the visible shudder with which she greeted Madame Marmoret's touch.

The woman stooped down and kissed her hand, but I saw Ange draw it away—very feebly it is true, but sufficiently to mark her dislike of the action—and then I knew that I had guessed aright, and she had been witness to the indignities heaped upon her father.

‘Hilda,’ said Tessie to me that afternoon, in a frightened whisper, ‘we *must* write for Dr. Perrin.’

I quite agreed with her; for though four hours had gone by since we had laid Ange upon her bed, she had not spoken a single word to either of us; and, except that her eyes were open, and she occasionally heaved a deep sigh, she appeared almost as unconscious as when we found her on the floor.

We had not left her for a moment since that time, but had been unable to persuade

her either to speak or swallow nourishment ; and I, for one, was becoming seriously alarmed.

‘We must not only send for the doctor, but your father must come home again, Tessie,’ I answered, ‘for I am afraid that Ange is going to be very ill. If you will write the letter at once, I will run down with it to the post before the afternoon diligence starts for Artois.’

‘What a pity Mr. Charteris is away to-day. He might have been so useful to us,’ sighed Tessie.

‘Oh! we can do very well without *him*,’ I responded impatiently.

I don’t know how it was, but at that moment I hated the thought of Cave Charteris in connection with our little Ange more than I had ever done before.

Some people might imagine that in an emergency Madame Marmoret, being our

servant, might have taken a letter to the post for us ; but such people could never know what Madame Marmoret was like.

She was far too fine and mighty to run menial errands, and this was certainly not the day on which I should have asked her to do so.

So, without taking any notice of her as she sat in the kitchen, dropping tears into the *potage* she was preparing for our dinner, I ran through the house into the street, and made my way to the post-office with Tessie's letter.

It was quite at the bottom of the town, and as I reascended the steep hill I came in collision with Mrs. Carolus, evidently bristling with some news of importance.

'My dear Miss Marsh, how fortunate I am to meet you! I have just called at your house, but, hearing you were out, I refused to enter, though Sophy insisted upon going in to see Miss Lovett.'

'I am afraid she will hardly find it worth her while, for Tessie could not stay to talk to her. We are in great distress at home to-day, Mrs. Carolus. Ange has been suddenly taken very ill, and I have just posted a letter for the doctor.'

'Oh! indeed! I am most distressed to hear it. There seems nothing but misfortune in St. Pucelle to-day. Sophy has been nearly out of her mind all the morning, and, to tell truth, I was glad of any excuse to be rid of her company for a little while, for she quite drives me distracted by the way in which she goes on.'

'Miss Markham has had no bad news, I hope.'

'Well, my dear, it *ought* not to have been bad news to her, for of what moment can the doings of a young man like Mr. Charteris be to a woman of the age of Sophy Markham? But you know how ridiculous she makes her-

self, and the absurd notions she gets into her head, and I suppose she was really persuaded that the man liked her and so forth, and now she says that he has blighted her whole life, and she can never be happy again.'

'But *why*, Mrs. Carolus? You have not yet told me the reason.'

'Oh! I suppose you have known it all along, as Mr. Charteris has been living with the Lovetts, but poor Sophy never heard till yesterday, when she was in Rille and met young Frederick Stephenson, that his cousin was a married man.'

'Mr. Charteris *married!*' I exclaimed. 'Oh no! she must be mistaken. It is *impossible*. It cannot be the case.'

'What! *You* had not heard it either, then?' inquired Mrs. Carolus, curiously. 'This beats everything! But you may rely on the truth of my assertion. Young Mr. Stephenson told Sophy who his wife had

been—a Miss Mary Ferrier, a great heiress, and they have a beautiful place called Parkhurst in Devonshire, and two children, and they've all had the scarlet fever, and that is the reason that Mr. Charteris was afraid to go home. Shabby of him, *I* call it, to desert his family in an extremity like that; but men are all selfish, my dear. Yet why he should have considered it necessary to come amongst us as a bachelor, puzzles me altogether.'

'*Married!*' I repeated, as various recollections tending to confirm Mrs. Carolus's statement floated in upon my mind, and then, a sudden fear seizing me, I exclaimed: 'Oh! I hope Miss Markham has not gone into the Lovetts' especially to tell them this!'

'I can't say, Miss Marsh, but she is very full of it, and you know what Sophy is over a piece of news. But where are you going?'

'Home—home!' I cried, as I commenced to run up the hill. 'Don't try to detain me.'

I must get home if I can, and prevent this story reaching Ange's ears.'

I have no doubt I left Mrs. Carolus in a state of the utmost perplexity and bewilderment, but I had no time for explanation. All my desire was to reach Tessie's side before she had communicated Miss Markham's news to her sister. As I raced towards the house, I met Sophy tripping downwards, but I would not stop even to inquire how much mischief she had done. I gained the door, panting and breathless, and came upon Tessie in the *salle*, still more tearful and alarmed than she had been before.

'Oh, Hilda! I am afraid that Ange is worse.'

'How? why? Who has been here?'

'Only Sophy Markham, and she didn't stay a minute. And she told us the most wonderful news——'

‘Never mind the news! Where did you see her?’

‘She came up to Ange’s bedroom! I couldn’t leave her, you know.’

‘And she told her wonderful news by that child’s bedside, and Ange heard every word of it! Oh! Tessie—Tessie! you have killed your sister!’



CHAPTER X.

BROKEN.

It was a hard thing to say to Tessie, who knew nothing of Ange's love for Charteris, but it was wrung from me in the extremity of my fear and pity for the child.

Tessie naturally demanded an explanation of my words, and then and there I made a clean breast of it, telling her what I had seen and heard, and how I had told her father of my discovery, and the unsatisfactory result of my communication.

We flew into each other's arms when the

recital was finished, and wept together over the misery of it all, as it behoved us, like true friends and sisters, to do.

‘And now, Tessie!’ I said, as I wiped my streaming eyes, ‘hide nothing from me. Let me know how much she heard and how she heard it, that we may be able to judge what is best to do to avert the consequences from her.’

‘I never left her side for a minute,’ sobbed Tessie, ‘but Sophy Markham pushed her way into the bedroom, and I could not turn her out. Ange was lying just as you left her, quite still and quiet, with her eyes fixed upon the ceiling. I whispered her condition to Miss Markham, and cautioned her to speak in a low voice, and I believe she did so. She was full of the news of Mr. Charteris turning out to be a married man, and of the shock it was to her; and how he had spent all his evenings lately in the billiard-room of the

Hôtel d'Etoile, and everybody had remarked upon his pronounced attentions to herself. She was talking a great deal of nonsense about wishing she had a brother to bring him to book for his scandalous behaviour to her, though I don't believe a word of all that, you know, Hilda.'

'I should think not, my dear! Cave Charteris may be a villain, but he is not a fool. But go on. What did Ange say to it all?'

'She never said a word; but as Miss Markham was running on at this rate, I thought I heard a rustle on the bed, and, turning round, I saw Ange sitting bolt upright with her eyes fixed upon us. Oh, Hilda! her face looked dreadful! You would never have forgotten it. It seemed as if her cheeks and her jaws had suddenly fallen in. I rushed to her side and laid her down again, and she never uttered a syllable, but

only stared at me with those melancholy wide-open eyes. I hurried Miss Markham out of the room, although I knew nothing of what you have now told me, and had no idea that Ange's appearance was due to anything she had said. Oh! do you really think it will hurt her?'

'How is she now, Tessie?'

'I think she must be asleep, but I cannot tell. She began to moan so, that I got frightened, and ran down here to watch for your return.'

'Let us go to her at once; and mind, not a word, even to one another, of this wretched business. We must hope that Ange did not hear or understand it, or that, if she did, she may forget it again. It is most important to keep the news from her till she is stronger. I am afraid that, at the best, it will prove a terrible blow to her.'

We hastened back to the bed-chamber, but there was no apparent change in our patient. She still lay on her side, staring into vacancy and occasionally moaning in a low tone to herself. I felt her head and hands; they were burning hot, and her lips had become dry and cracked. There was no doubt of it—Ange was in a raging fever, and every hour we became more alarmed.

‘What a mistake it is to live such a distance from a doctor!’ I exclaimed impatiently, as the evening drew on. ‘I wish I had gone into Artois myself by the diligence this afternoon, or sent Charlie Sandilands, and got Monsieur Perrin to ride over to-night. Is there no help nearer at hand, Tessie? Cannot the *petites sœurs* administer medicines on an emergency?’

‘I never heard of their doing so, Hilda. Monsieur Perrin is their hospital surgeon. If it were not for the convent, I don’t

think we should get him in St. Pucelle at all.'

'Just listen to her moans!' I said, in despair. 'Do ask Madame Marmoret to bring up another pitcher of spring water, Tessie. We must keep wet bandages round her head continually. I know of nothing better to do.'

With dinner-time came home Cave Charteris from shooting, and hearing the state of affairs upstairs from Madame Marmoret, he asked to speak to me. One may fancy the blazing eyes with which I went to meet him.

'What do you want?' I demanded brusquely, as I entered the little *salle*.

'Only to hear how much of this sad account that Madame has given me is true. Is it really the case that Mr. Lovett has gone to Rille, and Ange is so ill she can see nobody?'

‘Certainly, she can see nobody. She is in a strong fever, and confined to her bed. Have you anything more to say?’

‘Yes! That I am not aware what I have done that you should speak to me in such an uncourteous manner!’

‘Are you not?’ Then you must have a tougher conscience than even I gave you credit for.’

‘What do you mean, Miss Marsh?’ he inquired. ‘You appear to resent my taking an ordinary interest in Miss Lovett’s health. If you knew all, you would see that——’

‘I *do* know all!’ I interrupted him sternly, ‘and a great deal more than you have any idea of. I know that you are a married man, and that you had much better be at home with your wife and children than affecting this interest in a girl who can never be anything to you *again*.’

I put in *again*, that he might see we had

already guessed something of his philandering with poor Ange.

‘Has *she* heard of this?’ he asked me quickly, with the colour flaming in his face.

‘What is that to you?’ I replied angrily; ‘if you are an honest man, why should you be ashamed to tell the world that you are a married one? I refuse to inform you if Ange has heard the truth or not, but you may rest assured that she will not hear it from you. Her father will be home to-morrow, and the first thing I shall do will be to caution him to protect the interests of his daughter!’

Something very like an oath passed Mr. Charteris’s lips at this juncture, but he was at my mercy.

‘You are shooting very wide of the mark,’ he replied, with an attempt at nonchalance, ‘and, forgive me for adding, talking of what you know nothing. I am not in the habit of

confiding the details of my domestic life to everybody I meet in this world, but had the fact of my marriage been likely to affect Mr. Lovett or his daughters, I should certainly have announced it. Since you refuse to gratify my curiosity any further, may I ask to see Miss Lovett ?

‘She will not consent to see you,’ I replied, ‘for she is as well aware as I am of the way in which you have treated her sister.’

‘Under these circumstances, I presume that I had better relieve you both of my presence until Mr. Lovett’s return.’

‘You can do as you choose about that,’ I said, as I left him standing there and took my way upstairs again.

In another minute he had passed into the street and was on his road, as I concluded, to the Hôtel d’Etoile, where he had been in the habit of spending his evenings since Armand

had given up playing cards; and Madame Marmoret informed me that he did not return to the house that night.

It was a sad and anxious vigil that we spent beside the bedside of poor Ange, who, towards the small hours, began to toss her arms and head about and mutter rapid incoherent words of which we could not catch the import.

As morning dawned, she lay more quiet, but the cruel fever still raged on, and she was very, very weak.

‘How soon can the doctor arrive, Tessie?’ I inquired, as we met over a melancholy breakfast at a side-table in the kitchen. ‘When does the diligence come in?’

‘At eleven o’clock, Hilda. It is the only one, you know, so they are both sure to be with us by that time. What a comfort it will be to have papa at home once more!’

We sat together, anxiously waiting the advent of the diligence, and scarcely daring to make a surmise as to the probable issue of the doctor's verdict on our poor little sister's case.

Eleven o'clock struck! Half-past eleven, and then there was a sound of feet in the *salle* below. I did not stop to let Madame Marmoret announce any names, but flew past her on the stairs and into the room. Neither Monsieur Perrin nor Mr. Lovett awaited me there. The new arrival was Mr. Warrington. In my astonishment at seeing him, I forgot for a moment the absence of the others.

'Why! Mr. Warrington! you are the last person in the world I expected to see.'

'And yet I sent Miss Hilda notice of my intended visit,' he answered, shaking hands with me.

'True! but not of the probable time. However, I am very glad you are come. If I needed your advice when I wrote to you, I want it tenfold more now. I am in a sad tangle and perplexity, Mr. Warrington.'

'Sorry to hear that! I must have a long talk with your trustee about your financial concerns. I have come over for no other purpose. Do you wish your money to remain invested as it is at present?'

'No, I think not. The fact is, Mr. Warrington, I—I—(I have not told the Lovetts yet, as it is no concern of theirs) but—I am engaged to be married.'

'Hallo! That is sharp work, Miss Hilda. Not to a foreigner, I hope!'

'Now, Mr. Warrington, I thought you would be above such vulgar prejudice. He *is* a foreigner—Baron Armand de Nesselrode

—but he is better than all the Englishmen put together.’

‘Oh! that of course. And do you intend to settle your income upon this gentlemen, then?’

‘I have not decided that yet; but I do want to have it transferred to my own keeping. And oh! Mr. Warrington, you will have to pay a few debts of Mr. Lovett’s out of it too, because I promised the poor people I would be responsible for their money.’

At this announcement the solicitor looked grave.

‘We must speak further on that subject, Miss Hilda. I can do nothing in a hurry. Where is Mr. Lovett, and how soon shall I be able to see him?’

Then I remembered that my guardian ought to have arrived with the doctor from Rille by the same conveyance as Mr. Warrington had travelled in.

‘Why, he was at Rille, and didn’t he come with you in the diligence?’ I exclaimed hastily. ‘An old man with white hair and very blue eyes, and accompanied by a foreign doctor?’

‘No; there were no gentry at all in the diligence. Only a few peasants and a sister of mercy.’

‘What can have delayed them?’ I said, in distress. ‘We are in great trouble here to-day, Mr. Warrington. The youngest Miss Lovett was taken ill yesterday, and we have no medical assistance nearer than Rille. I wrote to her father by last night’s post, begging him to return this morning and bring a doctor with him, and I cannot imagine what should have prevented their arrival. What shall we do?’

‘Is the case serious, then?’

‘I fear it is—very serious!’

‘Can I do nothing to help you, Miss Hilda?’

‘Nothing, thank you, Mr. Warrington! We can but watch her and wait. Are you staying at the Etoile?’

‘No, at the Cloche. The other looked too noisy for me. I will say good-bye now, then, as you are busy, and you must let me know as soon as Mr. Lovett returns.’

‘I will—good-bye!’

I was so glad to see the last of the dear little man who looked as dapper as if he had travelled up from London in a sealed envelope), for my mind was too much occupied to attend to him. As soon as ever his back was turned, I flew to Tessie to speculate on what unforeseen accident could possibly have occurred to prevent her father joining us.

But speculation was of no use. We were utterly helpless. Wringing our hands would

not abate one breath of the dreadful fever that was burning in Ange's veins. All we could do was to pray to God.

Madame Marmoret had spread the news through St. Pucelle, and many a poor peasant woman came up that afternoon and pleaded for admission, only just to look upon the face of *petite* Ange. But I would let no one pass the threshold of her door, for her delirium was now at its height, and she talked continually.

Tessie, who had no stamina, looked worn out with one night's watching; and I persuaded her to go to my room and sleep, whilst I sat with her sister. It was a melancholy task to listen to the poor child's ravings, and I had to call up all my dearest thoughts of Armand, and to try and look steadily forward to the future that was opening for me, in order to keep my courage up to the sticking-point.

'I do not believe it,' Ange muttered rapidly—'I do not believe it. I cannot believe it! He is *not* married. Well, then, I will ask him myself. Where is he? At the Hôtel d'Etoile. I will go at once and ask him. It is but a step. What do my bare feet signify! I do not feel the stones. I only want to ask Cave if he is married. Yes, yes, I will go at once!' and in a moment she was half out of bed, with her fevered feet upon the floor.

'Dear, *dear* Ange!' I expostulated with her. 'Get into bed again! Where would you go to, my darling? You are not dressed. You cannot leave the room. You must lie down like a good child and go to sleep.'

She stared at me as if I had been a stranger.

'Who is it? Why would you keep me? I do not mind the cold. I must go to the Hôtel d'Etoile. Sophy says he is there

every evening, and perhaps he is waiting for me. He used to be angry sometimes because I did not go to meet him; but I was afraid papa would hear of it. And papa is so good! Oh, he is so good! so good! He is like a bright saint from heaven. Do you believe he would do anybody a wrong? If people tell lies, that is not his fault. He has a glory round his head. Now it is a rainbow bridge, stretching right into heaven! Let me climb up it—up—up—up—till we go through the shining gates together! But there is such a pain in my head! It dazzles me to look at them.'

'Lie down, my darling Ange! and let me bathe your poor head with this cold water.'

'Oh, sister Celeste, is it you? I have not finished the priest's vestment yet, *ma sœur*. There are so many stitches in it, and the gold thread sparkles so, it makes my head ache. But I shall finish it soon! very, very

soon! and then dear papa shall pay Cave the hundred and twenty-five francs he owes him. They will give me all that, will they not, *ma sœur*—and perhaps more? Yes, yes; I know—you said so; and then Cave shall have one hundred and twenty-five francs— one hundred and twenty-five francs— one hundred and twenty-five francs! Oh, don't ask me to count them over any more! They shine so, they make my head ache!

So this was the secret of the little maid's daily visits to the convent. She had been assisting the nuns in the embroidery orders they executed for the church, with the intention of paying back to Cave Charteris the money her father had borrowed from him.

Sweet, tender, self-denying little heart! Had it broken in the effort to sacrifice itself?

'Oh, Cave!' she screamed suddenly, as the fever made a fiercer grasp upon her brain,

'tell me you are *not* married! You cannot be! It is impossible, because you love me so! And you are going to tell papa! You have promised me that you will tell papa directly you receive that letter from England. Why can't you tell him now? Is he busy? Who are those people in the yard? How fierce and strange their faces look! Do they want to kill him? Oh, Cave, save my father! save my poor father! Look at all the wolves round him! Save him from the wolves!'

She was becoming so terribly excited, that I was obliged to hold her down in her bed by main force.

'Down, down!' I heard her mutter. 'Look at the gold pressing me down—till I sink into the earth! Napoleons—bright yellow Napoleons! How nice and cool they feel! but they are very heavy—much too heavy for me! I am not very old, you see. I was eighteen on the day I had those silver

earrings you like so much—and you are thirty! How can you love me when I am so much younger than yourself? Yet you do, don't you? You have sworn it so many times! Oh yes, yes; I understand. You needn't be afraid. I shan't tell Hilda!

The fever was running so high, and the dear child was becoming so violent, that I felt desperate. What could I do to quiet her? I had a bottle of laudanum in my room that I kept in the event of toothache, and I poured twenty or thirty drops of it in a little water, and gave it her to drink.

Rightly or wrongly done, it had the effect of making her doze off for an hour, during which time I sat with bated breath and folded hands, lest I should disturb the charm.

At seven o'clock Tessie crawled into the room again, looking like a washed-out rag. She seemed as if she wanted almost as much care as her sister, although I do not believe

she at all realised the danger Ange was in.

'Oh, I am so weary!' were the first words she said to me.

'I see you are. Well, look here, Tessie: I am going downstairs now to make you a good strong cup of coffee, and then I shall lie down till twelve o'clock, when you must come and call me again.'

'Oh, that won't be fair, Hilda! You sat up all last night.'

'Never mind! I am stronger than you are, and a few hours' rest will make me quite fresh. Ange is sleeping quietly now, and I hope she may continue to do so. But, at any rate, you are to wake me at twelve.'

Notwithstanding my boasted strength, however, I was very glad to close my eyes in sleep; for to hold a night's vigil is very trying when one is unaccustomed to it. But I have always possessed the ability to wake

myself at any given hour. I lay down that evening, expecting to be roused at midnight : and at midnight I roused myself, without giving any one the trouble to call me. I waked in the darkness, struck a match, and perceived the hands of my little clock stood at fifteen minutes past the hour.

‘Just like Tessie!’ I thought. ‘She thinks to cheat me into snoring till six o’clock in the morning. But I am one too many for her!’

I lit my candle, slipped on the shoes, which were the only articles of dress I had disencumbered myself of, and stole noiselessly across the corridor into the sisters’ room.

How quietly Ange must be sleeping! There was not a sound but her breathing to be heard. Surely she must be better! The room was wrapt in gloom; it was foolish of Tessie not to have procured a lamp. I threw the light of my taper across the bed. The first thing I perceived was the form of

Tessie, seated on the ground, with her head against the counterpane, and fast asleep. The words of Scripture flashed across my mind, 'Could ye not watch one hour?' But I excused her.

'Poor girl,' I thought, 'she is really weak! It is a physical impossibility for her to keep awake.'

The next moment I had thrown my light *upon* the bed to see how Ange fared.

Merciful heavens! *Where was she?* I rushed up to the couch and pulled down the clothes impetuously. It was empty—void!

I glanced round the room: it was in the same condition. *Ange was gone!*

'Tessie, Tessie!' I exclaimed loudly, as I shook that young lady into consciousness again. 'Where is your sister? Where is Ange?'

She waked with a start of bewilderment, and became as horrified as myself.

‘But she was *here*—she was *here*!’ she kept on repeating. ‘I only went to sleep for a minute, indeed, Hilda! I left her sleeping safely here.’

‘I believe it; but while you slept she has escaped. We must search every corner of the house at once. Come with me! there is not a moment to lose!’

We rushed from room to room without success. Ange was apparently nowhere on the premises. I clasped my hands upon my forehead to try and decide what to do next. Escaped! and in the middle of the night! Where could she have gone to? Where could she *wish* to go? I had it! Like an inspiration the answer came to me: ‘To the Hôtel d’Etoile!’

‘Tessie!’ I cried, ‘you must stay here, in case Ange returns. Go and wake Madame Marmoret to keep you company. And I will go and search for her in the town.’

'*In the town!* Oh, Hilda, how could she be in the town? It is impossible!'

'Find her in the house then!' I exclaimed, as I ran out of the front door, which was never fastened, night nor day, and flew down the steep stony street, in the direction of the Hôtel d'Etoile, as fast as my feet could carry me.

It was the principal hotel in the place, and boasted of a billiard-room, which was on the ground-floor and fronted the street. The young men in St. Pucelle made this billiard-room their nightly rendezvous: and it was here that Sophy Markham had averred that Charteris spent all his evenings.

Long before I reached it I could see the stream of light which its lamps threw across the road, and hear the sound of men's voices, laughing and talking together, and the click of the billiard-balls cannoning each other on the table. I felt sure it was here that

Ange's delirious fancy would lead her, and I was right. As I arrived opposite the open window of the billiard-room, I caught sight of a dark figure half hidden in the shadow of the wall, and springing towards it, I clasped her in my arms—Ange, with only her black dress covering her nightgown, her bronze-coloured hair floating over her shoulders, and her poor naked feet upon the ground.

‘Ange! Ange! my darling!’ I exclaimed, as I folded her to my heart. ‘Come back! Come home with me! You will be so ill if you remain here!’

‘*Hush! Hark!*’ she said, with such wide-open, fixed and solemn eyes, and in such a tone of awe, that I felt constrained to obey her.

There were perhaps a dozen men or more, knocking the billiard-balls about and filling the atmosphere with smoke, but Cave

Charteris's voice was to be distinguished above them all.

'Reckless old dog, that *Papa* Lovett,' I heard him say. 'He's a regular out-and-out swindler! I've lent him more cash myself since I've been here than his whole carcass would pay for, but I knew I should never see the colour of it again when I parted with it.'

'Took the change out in other ways, I suppose, *mon cher?*' suggested a foreigner. 'The *bon papa* has two pretty daughters, *n'est ce pas?* and it is said you have evinced a decided predilection for the little one.'

'*Ah! si donc, monsieur!*' cried Charteris, jestingly; 'don't make profane remarks! I am a married man! and other men's pretty daughters are of no further use to me.'

'*Vraiment!* I shouldn't have thought it!' rejoined the other, incredulously.

I had felt the slight form in my clasp

shiver under these words, as if it had been struck, and I could bear it no longer.

‘Ange!’ I exclaimed vehemently, ‘you *must* come home! this is no place for you! and you will catch your death of cold if you remain here any longer. I *insist* upon your returning with me!’

But there was no answer to my appeal, only the form I held seemed to sink lower and lower, until I could support it no longer.

‘Ange! Ange!’ I went on in terror, ‘try and hold yourself up, or I must call for assistance. I cannot carry you. Oh, darling! make one effort and let me get you home!’

Still she sunk down—down—heavier each moment in my arms.

‘Mr. Charteris!’ I screamed in my alarm ;
‘Mr. Charteris! Come here! Come at once—Ange is dying!’

There was a sudden commotion in the billiard-room as my voice reached its occu-

pants—a few exclamations of surprise—a cessation of sound—and then Cave Charteris came flying through the open window to my aid.

‘Hold her up!’ I panted; ‘I have no strength left! She escaped from us in her delirium, and I must have her carried home at once.’

He seized the little figure from me and laid the head against his arm. The light from the billiard-room streamed over her pallid face: her violet eyes were closed and sunken: there was a grey shade about the mouth that was not to be mistaken.

‘Ange! Ange! speak to me!’ I cried, in my anguish and dismay.

‘Ange! *petite* Ange! say you forgive me,’ chimed in the deeper tones of Cave Charteris’s voice.

At that sound she opened her eyes, very, very slowly, as if the action gave her pain,

and fixed them upon his. I saw the words, 'I *forgive*,' tremble upon the quivering lips, which closed again and then fell open as her spirit passed away upon the wings of Night !

* * * * *

I feel that no description I can append to this simple recital can increase its pathos. Ange died—just as I have told you—and I never looked upon the face of Cave Charteris after that night. I never wish to look upon it. He ranks in my memory as one of the worst men I ever met.

Mr. Lovett arrived home on the next day, with the doctor in his train, when *petite* Ange was lying stretched and still upon her bed, with her waxen hands filled with the autumn flowers the poor of St. Pucelle had placed in them. Her father's grief was naturally very violent—such saintly mourners usually mourn noisily. Yet he had not considered his child's illness of sufficient importance to

oblige him to give up a dinner at Rille, which he had been pledged to attend on the previous day.

I almost wondered, as I watched him bury her in the little strip of ground appropriated to those of her faith, in the Abbé Morteville's cemetery, that he did not fall headlong on the coffin and denounce himself as Ange's murderer. But no such idea ever entered his venerable head. He lived for several years afterwards, to talk of virtue and practice vice, and when he died, his creditors howled like hungry wolves above his grave, and had to recoup themselves by abusing him for the rest of their lives. Some few got their money—those to whom I had promised it in the courtyard—but their demands were but as a drop in the ocean. Mr. Warrington's advent in St. Pucelle was a terrible blow to Mr. Lovett, especially when his legal research on my behalf resulted in

the discovery that a large portion of my little patrimony had been wasted or spent. But I would not let him prosecute my guardian, for Tessie's sake. I felt that she had sorrows enough to bear, poor girl, without this open disgrace being added to them. By the time that Mr. Lovett died, my Armand's term of probation in Algiers was ended, and he had got his own again, so I made Tessie come and live with us.

That was a happy period. It was so delightful to watch the roses return to her cheeks, and the roundness to her form, and to feel that the saddest part of her life was over, and she was free to choose her future destiny. But we did not keep her with us long. In Paris that was hardly to be expected! Every one prophesied she would marry a foreigner, yet she married——

Stay! Armand and I are going over next week to England, to spend a whole month in

Norwood, with my dear old friend Mrs. Sandilands, to whom I am very anxious to introduce my husband and my son, Godefroi de Nesselrode—who is already seven years old.

And Charlie, dear old boy! is anticipating our arrival as if he were still my mother's 'blue-eyed baby' of twenty-two, instead of a sober citizen of thirty, because he wants me, not to be introduced to, but to renew my acquaintance with, *his wife*—Mrs. Sandilands Number Two—my dear friend Tessie!

It all came about as naturally as possible, although it sounds so romantic, for Charlie came to stay with us in Paris, and popped the question to her there, without even asking my advice upon the subject, and took her home with him to be his mother's eldest daughter!

* * * * *

So they all lived happy ever afterwards.

Yes, that is true—strictly and literally true—because they were not such fools as to expect, or wish for, unalloyed happiness in this world of shadow. They had been hungry, and they were filled—they had been naked, and they were clothed—they had suffered, sometimes very acutely—and they were loved and looked after, and guarded by good and true men, and would have been ingrates as well as fools, not to recognise how much more fortunate they were than many of their fellows.

But there is one dark passage in Tessie's life and mine which we shall never forget—the night that Ange's spirit spread its wings and flew away from us. Sometimes I wonder, when Armand is more than usually tender to me, or little Godefroi more than usually good, if *she* is hovering round us who are so happy, and rejoices because we rejoice. Or does she stand by Cave Charteris's

side, for the sake of the love she bore him, to urge him on to better thoughts and a higher career? Or is she wandering through the Elysian fields with the old father whom she believed in so faithfully, until his blazoned disgrace snapped her tender heart-strings!

Who can tell me? No parson, no priest, no book! Nothing but the great mystery that bore her from us—the solver of all our doubts, the cure for all our sorrows: Death!

Let us thank God that amidst the troubles He ordained for this earthly pilgrimage, He left us a sure and certain remedy that cannot fail to come to every one at last!

Ange and Tessie and I shall walk together once more, through flowery paths, more beautiful than those in St. Pucelle, and talk of everything that may have befallen us since we last parted! And my mother—my

unforgotten, lamented mother, shall smile on us there, and bid us welcome. Reader! do you not believe it?

Then, I pity you! Farewell!

THE END.





